

THE
DÜRR'S COLLECTION OF STANDARD
PLAGUE-STONE
AMERICAN AND BRITISH
AUTHORS.

EDITED

BY

WILLIAM E. DRUGULIN.

VOL. 65.

AUTHORIZED EDITION.
THE PLAGUE-STONE OF ABERFORD.

BY

JOHN SAUNDERS,

AUTHOR OF "ABEL DRAKE'S WIFE" ETC.

LEIPZIG: ALPHONS DÜRR.

1885.



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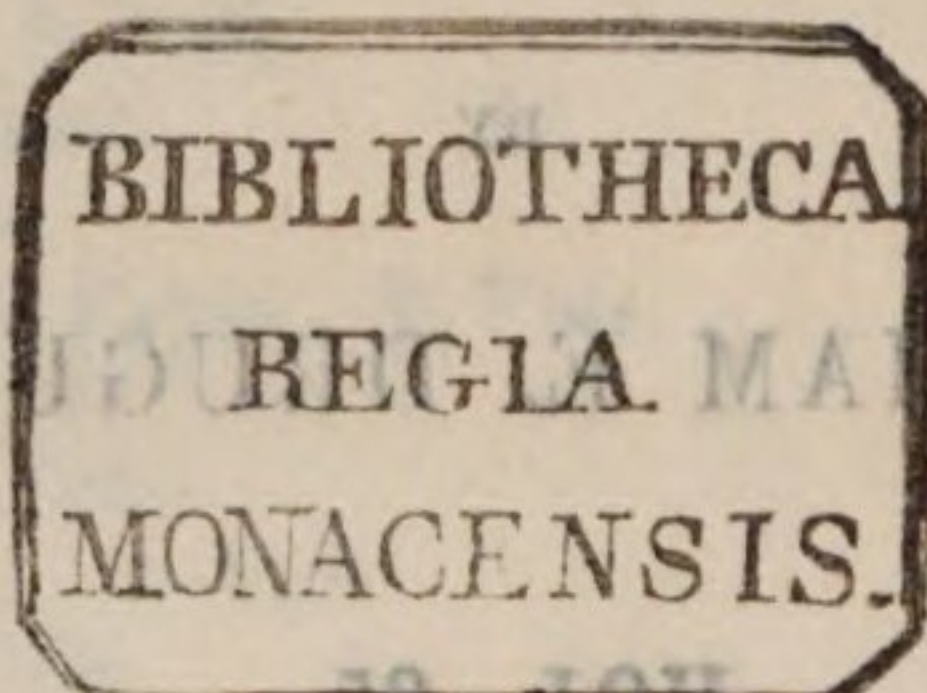
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JOHN SANDERS

AUTHOR OF "THE DRINKER'S WIFE," ETC.

FRANK, THE HISTORY OF PHILIP THE SECOND, 8 Vols.

JOHN, THE BODILY FORM, 3 Vols.

JOHN, ALICE DRINKER'S WIFE.

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JOHN, ONE CORNER, VERMONT.

THE
PLAGUE-STONE
OF
PLAGUE-STONE OF ABERFORD.
ABERFORD.

CHAPTER I.

BY

JOHN SAUNDERS,

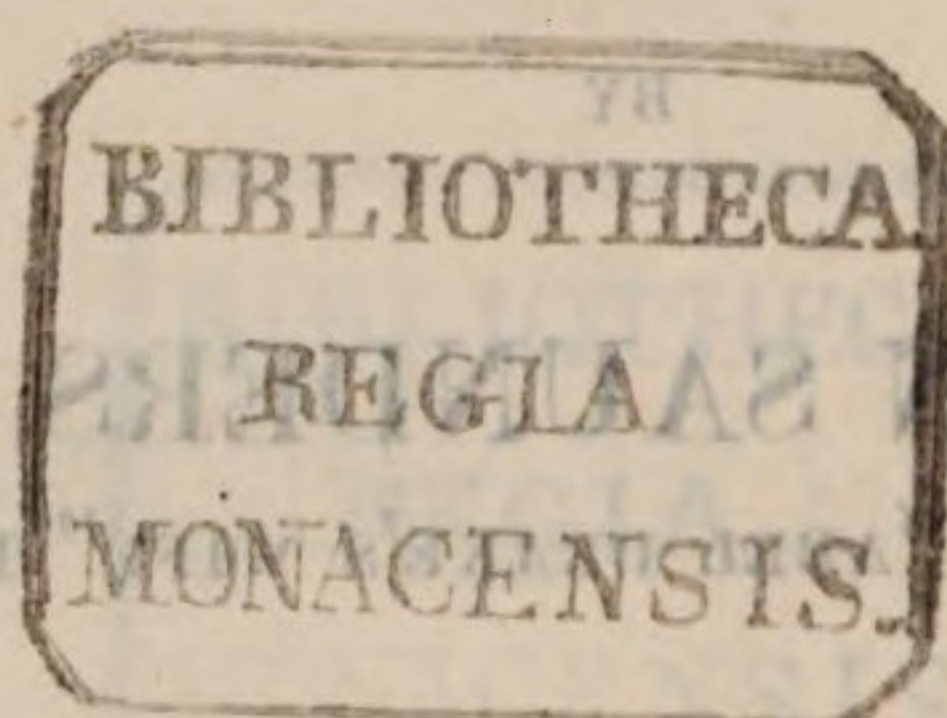
AUTHOR OF "ABEL DRAKE'S WIFE" ETC.

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THE
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AUTHORIZED EDITION.

LEIPZIG: VILHOLM DÜRR.

1864.

THE PLAGUE-STONE OF ABERFORD.

CHAPTER I.

LIFTING THE CURTAIN.

THE fire-light shines full on her face. The child feels instinctively that she must repress the faintest tremble of the lash, the slightest quiver of the nostril, the least movement that may betoken she is conscious of being secretly watched. Again and again has she, in her half sleep, half reverie, fancied there were eyes directed upon her through the little glass window of the door to the shop; and again and again has she pushed the fancy hastily and nervously away; but this time there could be no possibility of mistake; she had heard the soft approaching footstep, noticed the slow, careful rise of the corner of the curtain, and its remaining lifted, while a searching gaze, which she could not see, but which she trembled to feel, was watching her — she was sure of it! — in order to learn, perhaps, if she were asleep.

Why? She cannot tell — she cannot even think just now, or speculate in any way, though her imagination is painfully active. The fact, by its mere existence, awes and absorbs her whole being. Half-remembered tales of women, placed in a position like this, when their very lives depended upon their strength and courage in enabling them to retain the appearance of sleep, rush in upon her, and confuse her with she knows not what dim suggestions of a corresponding necessity. If she be watched, who can be the watcher? Who but her father? He is the only person in the house, she believes, besides herself. If he it is, what can he meditate that —

But the child stopped suddenly in her thoughts, tightening, by a wild grasp of the reins of her soul, the half-frenzied alarms that were hurrying her away, she knew not whither; and she bent all her resolution to the task of preserving, under that mysterious gaze, a state of perfect quietude.

She heard the grey linnet flying to and fro in his narrow cage; she heard the mouse making a rustle among the heaps of books and pamphlets piled up at the far end of the room; she heard the fire crackling and burning cheerily; and thus alone she was conscious how the time was passing; while her face was growing paler and more rigid, her breathing faster and more laboured, under the influence of this long-protracted, secret examination. Once she was about

to cry out, as in a dream, and she felt the very words struggling at her dry lips before she could overmaster them. She would have given worlds, if worlds had been in her possession, to have seen the fire-blaze droop and die. But, on the contrary, it leaped, and laughed, and babbled in its mirth with a kind of impish malice that curdled the child's blood, as she knew how its light was revealing her, and would not let her melt, like the other objects in the place, into shadowy indistinctness and rest—blessed, blessed rest! So there she still sat; and the vivid fire-light brought out all the sharp, angular lines of her form, and the childish and scanty cut of her clothes, which made her look so tall and gaunt, and gave her such a wild, overgrown air. But, above all, the ruddy, boisterous light seemed to seek out and illumine her small face, so youthful in its outline, yet so stamped with a foretaste of age that one almost expected to see grey hair about it, rather than that deep, close mass of blackness, brought to the shape of the head, like a cap, by being tucked behind the ears, and having the ends cut short.

Will that curtain never drop? Already the linnet, weary of pecking uselessly at the bars of the cage, is asleep on its perch; the mouse has scuffled away to her home behind the wainscot; and the Dutch clock gives warning that it is approaching the hour, and is about to strike.

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The child's resolution falters; she can no longer control the shrinking, straining nerves; the nostrils *will* quiver; the firm but sad mouth will twitch at the corners the choking feeling will rise in the throat; a gasp—yes, she cannot help it—a gasp escapes her, and, on the instant, the little curtain falls! Oh, what a long, blessed sigh of relief the child gives!

Could it really have been her father? Was she still believed to be asleep, and, if not—— Again she checks, with a vague sense of their wickedness, the fancies that crowd all about her. She will not again be so spell-bound; she will resist in time. She starts up, stretches her aching limbs, and begins hurriedly to spread a cloth on the table, and to prepare a scanty supper for two persons, tutoring herself the while as to what she shall say when she goes to her father, who remains noiselessly occupied in the shop. Presently she walks to the door, touches the handle, feels it tremble, and—as she fancies—let go. She shivers inwardly, hesitates, goes back to the fire, gives it a plunging stir, sweeps up the ashes she has thus caused to fall, and then again suddenly grasps the handle of the door with a quick, nervous jerk, as though to give previous warning by the noise; but it so happens that she makes no noise. She then slowly opens the door, and looks in upon the darkened shop.

The gas has been put out long ago. The gloomy February night sheds no radiance over the tops of

the closed shutters — does not even reveal, as usual, the narrow strip of sky. A candle, in a high lantern on the counter, throws a dim, uncertain gleam over the place; and it is some time before her eyes, just withdrawn from the intense red glow of the fire, can distinguish one object from another in the prevailing confusion. But she thinks only of her father, for it is him she seeks. She sees him stooping in the middle of the shop, between the heaps of books and stationery that are piled high on each side of him, against the two counters. He is pouring something from one of the workmen's cans upon a heap of shavings left by the joiners, who have been altering the shelves.

"Father!" the child said, timidly, and scared at the sound of her own voice. It was a very sweet and childlike voice, but did not seem at all to belong to the wan, old-looking face. He started, dropped his arm with the can behind his back, but immediately — moved by a second impulse — brought it forward, and smiled. A strangely sweet smile the child thought it, as again she spoke — "Father, supper's ready."

"Oh, yes; I'll come. How you startled me, Constance! What careless workmen these are, to leave so many shavings about! I have been pouring some water over them for safety. Always guard against fire, my dear."

"Yes, father; I've been reading that book you left on the table to-night, that tells you what to do in

case of fire, and what the chief causes of fire are, and all that—but, father, what is it smells so?”

“Oh, it’s the empty turpentine-can I’ve been using to get water in.”

“Father, hadn’t I better take the shavings away?”

“No, no, run along—I’m coming. I’ll just put them under the counter. They’ll be safe there—sparks can’t drop among them.”

He went away with the shavings, and shortly returned, observing, quite cheerily—

“There!—now, Constance, for supper. I am tired with covering up books and things, but the plasterers, you know, are coming at six in the morning.” So saying, Mr. Daniel Chorley took his daughter’s hand, and they both went into the sitting-room.

A robust, fresh-coloured, genial-looking old gentleman he seemed as he stood by the fire in his soft, glossy, black clothes, frilled shirt, and silvery hair, warming, now his fingers, now his toes, and looking smilingly around, at first on things in general, then at his supper, then at Constance, who began to bask, though tremulously, in these rare but golden beams of a sunshine to which she had been little accustomed.

There was a curious resemblance, and a still more curious dissimilarity, between the two: he so healthy-looking, cosy, and prosperous; she so lanky, shabby, and sad; yet both alike in feature; and both exhibiting the same self-wrapped, secretive manner. In her

this seemed to spring from timidity—the chill of a loveless life, and a shrinking from any—the least—demand for sympathy; not because it was not wanted, and would not have been esteemed as precious, but because the poor little heart had often ventured forth to seek something of the kind, and generally returned more sorrowful and hopeless for its vain quest. But it was nothing of this nature, certainly, that made the father so secretive beneath all the jovial expansion of his spirits. He was evidently a man who maintained a robust faith in himself. No wonder, when he saw how few other men there were who had not also the same belief in his abilities, character, and gentlemanly ways. That high, bare, glossy forehead seemed an open tablet, on which the world might read the nobleness and all-sufficiency of the deep, rich volume inscribed within. Yet to those who looked more curiously there appeared a sort of tight drawing of the skin from the crown of the head, and a faint crossing and re-crossing of wrinkles over the brow, as though produced by a kind of scarcely noticeable, but not the less real and unchanging, frown. There was also a restless and a furtive play of the dark eyes, which could never fix on anything, least of all on another human eye, and yet which could not rest in peace beneath their shaggy covert, but always seemed beating about and about some secret mental difficulty, but never daring directly to cope with it. Was he

suspicious? Surely not—this cosy-looking, comfortable bookseller, whom his neighbours called, in genuine respect, “The old gentleman.”

“There, child,” he said, “put away your work, and sit down and enjoy your supper. Take a bit of this nice pie. Oh, don’t be afraid, for once; besides, there’s plenty for me.”

The child looked, that she might make quite sure he was speaking seriously, then obeyed him, with a hesitating manner, and presently began to swallow—something more than the pie.

“Why, Constance, I declare your clothes are all worn out—and—yes, quite shabby! Ah, well, we’ll see to them soon, when trade revives. I must study appearances in the shop, you know, for myself, or you shouldn’t have waited so long.”

Did the child hear correctly? Her father talking thus to her—almost, she ventured to think, apologetically? He! who had never troubled himself before to give her even the commonest explanations? Her heart swelled; she thought she ought to say something. But she didn’t know how to address him—and so she was silent.

“Here, Constance, child, come and sit by me. There now, give me a kiss. Pshaw! child, you have wetted all my face. There, there—bless the girl!—can’t you be quiet? There! All’s right now, isn’t it?”

“Yes, father.”

“If, now, we had only Marmaduke from school!”

“Ah, yes,” replied the child; “he did so wish it.”

“Yes, I know. Why, I wonder? Oh, I remember; it is your birthday—so it is. Dear me! Why, how tall you grow for your age! Fifteen? No. Fourteen? Pshaw! Of course not—only thirteen. One fancies you much older, both from your body and mind. I ought to have remembered the year, I’m sure. Two such disappointments were enough to burn it into me—a fortune lost to the family, that was likely to have come to me—and——” But Mr. Chorley’s speech rested there, with the unfinished sentence.

“What was the other disappointment, father?”

“Well, Constance. I’ll tell you, because you are a sensible girl, and can understand my feelings. I expected a boy—a son and heir, you know—and, with my expectations just then——”

“O, yes, father—I’m sure I don’t know why I came—I’m very sorry—I couldn’t help it, father, you know, could I?—and—and——”

“Now, Constance, I hate crying—don’t cry.”

“No, father, I won’t.”

“There——there——that’s a good girl!”

And Mr. Daniel Chorley put his arm caressingly round the little shrinking but yearning form, and brought her towards him, just a little; and she had a strange feeling, beforehand, of nestling at last in a father’s bosom, and then—the bliss of that idea seemed

too great to be ventured upon as a reality; and so she remembered that she had not drawn her father's beer, and she hurried away into a narrow closet between the parlour and the shop — "the lumber closet" they called it. There she put down her candlestick and jug, both very carefully; and the trembling knees bent, and the hands dropped on the cold brick floor, and the face dropped upon them, and the stout little heart gave way — oh, so sadly! — and the slender frame quivered under the force of the emotions that battled fiercely for the right to come forth to the sun and air. But the child struggled hard to quell the hysteric tide of grief before her father should overhear her, and destroy, in his just anger, all the fair hopes she was building up. Ah, yes, this might yet be a true birthday for her, she thought, if she didn't expect too much.

At last she rose, wiped her eyes in the lining of her skirt, drew the beer, and was hurrying forth in the fear that he would ask her why she had been so long, when her eye fell upon the pea-sticks, and the firewood, and the row of candles in bundles, and she looked round her uneasily, even while she said to herself —

"No, no—it's my wicked fancies! There's nothing here fresh but the candles — and he did buy just as many all at once, last winter."

But, in leaving the closet and shutting the door, the child could not help again opening it to take another long look, while saying to herself —

“I hope I left all safe.”

When she returned with the jug to her father, he was evidently angry about the delay, yet he said little; and when he looked at her, poor Constance felt all the past revive, and there was no more thought that night of her nestling on a father's breast. The birthday dream vanished—for ever!

“Now, Constance, go to bed, and take care how you put out the light. I will come up when I think you are asleep.”

She rose to obey, but did not leave the room, and seemed to find one occupation after another to detain her.

“Constance, did you hear me?”

“Yes, father, I am going. Good night.”

“Good night.”

And so they parted, as they had always parted before. No kiss exchanged—no pleasant thoughts to gild the entrance-gate to sleep—no loving fondness to make either feel they would be missed by the other, on the coming morn, if death should refuse to allow the lids to be opened that sleep had closed.

Scarcely, however, had the child reached the landing at the top of the stairs on the first story before her excited imagination was again at work, bringing more and more tangibly before her some vague dread of fire. It was strange—it was inexplicable—but it was to her, also, appallingly clear that there was scar-

cely a yard of the house or staircase on or about which did not hang the most dangerous things, if a fire should, by any accident, break out. She had just noticed the dry pea-sticks, firewood, and candles, in the lumber-closet. She remembered that in the shop the front of the book-shelves was protected all the way round by old curtains, or by sheets of paper, pinned end to end; that the counter was covered with books, and paper, and writing-desks, and things of that kind; and that they also were protected by the large sheets of brown paper that had been carefully placed over them by her father, before the plasterers began their work of whitewashing the ceiling. And, as she gazed about her on the landing, she saw a roll of paper about to be hung on the wall, partly unrolled and the loose piece hanging over the banisters, just as her father had left it after looking at the pattern. Other large rolls of old brown paper, received with parcels in the business, and carefully stored for future use, lay about, covered thickly with dust; also a great worn-out screen, on which, in its better days, Constance had gazed for hours together, on first waking in the summer mornings, and let loose her fancy with the birds that were gaily sporting all over it. It was tattered now, and strips of the surface were hanging loose. Old packing-cases, too, were on the landing, brought forth from the corners and recesses where they were usually placed in order to allow the

workmen to go on with the renovation of the house. As Constance's mind ran rapidly over these dangerous elements of their home, it seemed to grow more excited at each step, until even the most insignificant facts assumed unnatural proportions, and she grew sick and wild with terror at the phantasms she had herself half created.

Just then there was a knock at the street-door. Constance knew the knock—it was that of their neighbour, Mr. Fleck, who usually came once a week or so to play a game of cribbage with her father. What did he want now? She listened. Her father opened the door, greeted Mr. Fleck with his usual cordiality, and brought him in. She must go to bed, she said to herself; but she did not go, for all that. There was a sort of fever in her blood. She seemed almost to want excitement now as food; she must listen, in the absence of anything else to occupy her attention. She went to her room, on the second or top story, put her candle on the little black box that contained her worldly treasures, and slipped out again, shutting the door after her to conceal the light. As she noiselessly descended the stairs, she heard that, instead of sitting down to cards, her father was taking Mr. Fleck into the shop to see the alterations; and at once, by virtue of that single fact, the scales seemed to fall from the poor child's eyes, and again she shrunk in horror from herself, and from the thoughts that had darkly glanced across her vision, but to which she had not dared to

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“No harm, no harm, Chorley,” she heard him say; “I only stumbled over the can.”

“Oh! it’s the painters’ turpentine, careless rascals! Dear me! it’s running all over the floor, and will get into the books. Just hold them up while I find something to prevent the stream from spreading.” Constance listened, while Mr. Fleck held up the books, and Mr. Daniel Chorley, bustling round the counter, fetched out a large handful of shavings, saying, “These will do capitally!” And she heard her father wipe up the spilt turpentine by the aid of the shavings. “Thank you,” he continued; “that will do. The books are safe, and I’ll put these shavings away in the lumber closet, and they’ll be safe too!”

“What a dismal light you have there, Chorley!”

“Oh, yes—the lantern. Why, you see, I’m afraid to trust myself here with an open candle, after dark, amid all this confusion. Would to Heaven I could get rid of these workmen! They keep me wretchedly nervous. I found to-night two or three lucifer-matches on the floor, dropped by them, I have no doubt.”

“Ah, neighbour, you’re not the man to have a fire in your house: a more careful person I never saw. But I hope you’re insured, for all that? *I* am, and I always sleep peaceably in consequence.”

“Yes, I am insured. But it is n’t the property — bad as it would be to have the worry of replacing it — no, it’s the danger — the danger, neighbour — that most troubles me. Excuse me for one moment; I think I saw another of those infernal matches beneath your foot. No, no; ’tis nothing.”

“Well, Chorley, I’m sure I hope you’ll be repaid for all your trouble and expense in making these improvements. I think you will. And as one railway, at a distance, took the trade from our town, so this new one, that comes close, and which will open next week, may bring it back.”

“That’s just what I’m reckoning on. Oh! I wouldn’t have gone to all this expense and worry, but that I saw a new era dawning — a new era, mark my words, sir — for this place, and for all its inhabitants.”

“So be it. Good night, Chorley.”

“Good night, Mr. Fleck. Thank you for coming in. Then I shall expect you to-morrow, and early?”

“Yes — at half-past eight.”

“Good night!”

The street-door opened and closed again, the bolts were drawn, the key was turned in the lock, and the child felt as though the whole world was being shut

too great to be ventured upon as a reality; and so she remembered that she had not drawn her father's beer, and she hurried away into a narrow closet between the parlour and the shop — "the lumber closet" they called it. There she put down her candlestick and jug, both very carefully; and the trembling knees bent, and the hands dropped on the cold brick floor, and the face dropped upon them, and the stout little heart gave way — oh, so sadly! — and the slender frame quivered under the force of the emotions that battled fiercely for the right to come forth to the sun and air. But the child struggled hard to quell the hysteric tide of grief before her father should overhear her, and destroy, in his just anger, all the fair hopes she was building up. Ah, yes, this might yet be a true birthday for her, she thought, if she didn't expect too much.

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“Oh! it’s the painters’ turpentine, careless rascals! Dear me! it’s running all over the floor, and will get into the books. Just hold them up while I find something to prevent the stream from spreading.” Constance listened, while Mr. Fleck held up the books, and Mr. Daniel Chorley, bustling round the counter, fetched out a large handful of shavings, saying, “These will do capitally!” And she heard her father wipe up the spilt turpentine by the aid of the shavings. “Thank you,” he continued; “that will do. The books are safe, and I’ll put these shavings away in the lumber closet, and they’ll be safe too!”

“What a dismal light you have there, Chorley!”

“Oh, yes—the lantern. Why, you see, I’m afraid to trust myself here with an open candle, after dark, amid all this confusion. Would to Heaven I could get rid of these workmen! They keep me wretchedly nervous. I found to-night two or three lucifer-matches on the floor, dropped by them, I have no doubt.”

“Ah, neighbour, you’re not the man to have a fire in your house: a more careful person I never saw. But I hope you’re insured, for all that? *I* am, and I always sleep peaceably in consequence.”

“Yes, I am insured. But it is n’t the property — bad as it would be to have the worry of replacing it — no, it’s the danger — the danger, neighbour — that most troubles me. Excuse me for one moment; I think I saw another of those infernal matches beneath your foot. No, no; ’tis nothing.”

“Well, Chorley, I’m sure I hope you’ll be repaid for all your trouble and expense in making these improvements. I think you will. And as one railway, at a distance, took the trade from our town, so this new one, that comes close, and which will open next week, may bring it back.”

“That’s just what I’m reckoning on. Oh! I wouldn’t have gone to all this expense and worry, but that I saw a new era dawning — a new era, mark my words, sir — for this place, and for all its inhabitants.”

“So be it. Good night, Chorley.”

“Good night, Mr. Fleck. Thank you for coming in. Then I shall expect you to-morrow, and early?”

“Yes — at half-past eight.”

“Good night!”

The street-door opened and closed again, the bolts were drawn, the key was turned in the lock, and the child felt as though the whole world was being shut

out, and that she ought to run to it for protection before it was too late. She had heard the dialogue about the turpentine. Oh! what had her father been doing—and intending—when she had come upon him, bent over the shavings? It was turpentine and not water that he had been sprinkling over them. And why did he so deceive her? The ghastly fear *would* now be gazed upon and questioned—would not any longer be thrust aside. The child felt all her senses grow benumbed. Her trembling knees refused support, and she was obliged to clutch the banister to keep herself from falling. But she sees his light returning through the shop. Dare she confront him? Yes, she will; and the cry of “Father, what is this? oh, what are you doing?” is on her lips; but the well-known footsteps seem to bring reproach as they fall upon her ear. Her fear seems to melt to a mere fancy as the familiar sounds get nearer and nearer, until she thinks she can endure anything rather than that he should see her suspicion; and she seems to fly with winged feet up the narrow, steep; stairs never once pausing till she stands, panting for breath, in her own room.

Presently she tries to undress, but her fear, which she had wrestled with and driven off, has not been altogether driven away. It returns, arrests her fingers, makes her gaze and gaze upon it, till she becomes fascinated by its awful form and flaming eyes.

In vain she thrusts at it with all her little strength,

as though it were something corporeal, crying, "I won't believe it—I won't! I won't!" It stands immovable before her aching eyeballs, refusing to be disowned. Child as she is, this horrible spectre calls her parent.

Hark! Hastily she puts out her candle, and crouches down upon the bed, listening. She hears smothered, cautious footsteps—that would be noiseless but for the occasional creak of an old board—approach, and pause at her door. Now all is quiet again—so quiet, that she can hear a great moth knocking its wings about between the window and the blind. Hark! Again a board creaks, and this time at some distance from her door—then on one stair after another, and each time sounding more faintly. Yes, he has gone down. Whither?—what to do? She is standing in the middle of the room, gazing round, with clasped hands and wild, questioning eyes, as if the bare white walls might answer her. She opens her door noiselessly, goes out upon the landing, and stands looking down over the banisters into the unshapeable but almost living darkness. All is still. The wind outside seems to make the silence within more intense. A great lean cat, as it runs along the parapet, looks in at the broken window, leaps down, and comes and rubs itself against her legs with a loud, cheering purr. Very sweet to the lonely child is this touch of sympathy, and she cowers down lower and lower towards it, until

she is sitting on the floor, with her arms folded round her knees, and the cat curling itself up for warmth on a bit of her frock. The child seems to find a sort of dreary comfort in that dark, dismal landing, and strange companionship. Then comes the wind, wilder than ever, whistling about the house-top, filling her ears with indescribable sounds, that she imagines to come, first from one part of the house, and then another. She even fancies she hears, as in a dream, or as a matter that doesn't concern her, the voice of her little brother, crying to her, as though he needed her, "Constance! Constance!" But nothing surprises her now. She only wonders if God ever goes away for a time, to see how the world will manage in his absence.

And now the cat rises, and turns restlessly round and round, and looks through the banister with an uneasy moan; and the child shivers to see her strange dread shared by another living thing besides herself. Now the wind sinks to rest, leaving a dead, unearthly stillness behind, upon which she is fearful of letting out her own breath, lest it awaken some other sound. The cat purrs again soothingly, and weariness creeps over the girl. Her eyes grow heavy—her head droops; but she suddenly starts up, only just able to prevent a scream at some fearful image that has passed before her closed eyes.

Some new thought quickens the beats of her heart, and warms the blood in her veins. She rises, and

once more looks down those impenetrably black stairs. She will break the spell herself. Yes, she will go to her father, and tell him all that has been in her mind this wretched night. It can't be true! How can he forgive her if it isn't? Perhaps he may pity her a little for what she has suffered, and speak a kind word, or pass his hand over her head. Or, if he does not, but is only angry, as most likely he will be, the sound of his voice will comfort her, and her fear will be gone. She does not wait for the voice within her to supply another word, but glides down the stairs, running swiftly, as if she fears that something may happen to shake her resolution, or to interfere with it, before she gains his room. The door stands a little way open; she reaches his bed without having made the slightest noise. The room is in perfect darkness, so that she cannot see his face, but she stands there, listening eagerly to his breathing; it is sonorous and perfectly regular. Would he be sleeping here thus peacefully, if—Each breath swells the remorse in the child's heart till it becomes unbearable. Her lips and eyelids quiver like leaves before rain. Then comes a rush of tears, and a bursting, impetuous cry that will not be thrust back—

“Father!”

He rises slowly up, yawning, leaning on his elbow, and rubbing his eyes.

“Is it you, Constance? Why, what's the matter?”

The child presses close to him, and begins to pour out all her pent-up anguish in tears and broken words — her voice now sinking to a frightened whisper, or changing into sobs, and now rising so loud and thrilling, that the listener, at first so calmly alarmed, stretches forth his hand with an angry and excited, “Hush!”

“Father! father! I have been so wicked. Let me tell you all, for I am afraid to go to bed without. Don’t be angry, father; but I thought you were going to do something dreadful—so very dreadful, I can’t say what—but it made my flesh creep to see you going about it all the evening; and I dared not go to bed, but sat shivering on the landing, looking down in the dark, waiting and waiting for the end to come; and when I nearly fell asleep, I thought I saw such things—oh, such fearful things!—great, high flames of fire, father! red, roaring fire!”

Again the hand was stretched out even more excitedly than before.

“Hush, girl, hush! you shall talk no more like this. Listen. Constance, you are right; you have been wicked; and it would be a judgment upon you if a fire were to break out this very night!”

“Oh, father! don’t talk so—don’t—don’t!”

“Then go to bed, and have done with these wicked fancies. I’ll go and look over the house to satisfy you, if you like.”

He got out of bed, and stood before her half dressed, though the child did not notice the circumstance. As he put on a dressing-gown, he continued —

“What is it? Are you frightened to go alone? Then stay here till I come back.”

But her hands closed more and more tightly on his arm, her head is thrown back, and her eyes fixed wildly on his face. He tries to speak calmly and kindly to her, but the drops stand thick upon his brow.

“Constance! sit down, child; your fancies have made you quite ill. Poor child! sit down. You’re as white as a sheet!”

Again that hoarse, unnatural whisper thrills him —

“Father! what is this? It is black night outside! There is no candle! How can you see my face? How can I see yours? Tell me, O father! tell me! what makes the room so light—light, red light, all over it?” Then, wringing her hands, she rushes distractedly about, crying, “What is it? oh, what is it? Father! father! father!”

As she turns to him again he clutches her shoulder, and mutters, with a faint, hollow voice, “I—I’m afraid there is a fire somewhere. I’ll see. But hark! what—what was that?” And his own voice grew fainter than the one he listened to.

“What! Why, it is they that are come—the great, high flames, father, you made! You did! you did! I

watched you nursing them so that they might grow and grow right to the top of the house!”

“Con—stance!”

“Hush, I say!—listen! O God! there is something else!”

Yes, there is a strange sound penetrating through the angry roar—a faint, childish voice—

“Con—stance! Con—stance!”

The girl contracts with misery. “Oh, father, father! ’Duke must be here—in his bedroom. He must have come home without telling us, and climbed in at the back kitchen window, as he used to do, and so got up-stairs. He asked me if he might, and I told him, No. Oh, father! father!”

The father is staggering against the bedpost, and the words that issue from his pallid lips take the last thin veil from his act—“Oh, my God! my God! what have I done?”

Again feebly and falteringly is the cry heard—

“Con—stance!”

The red light that now displays every wrinkle, every line of remorse in the old man’s face, suddenly becomes of a lightning-paleness in colour. Near the ceiling, a square flap of the canvas partition—it is a very old house, and strangely altered and patched—has fallen slowly back, and a cutting stream of white light enters, illuminating the floating particles of dust that it encounters in its way.

“Constance!” This time the cry was sharp and piercing.

“Marmaduke! Save him—save us, Constance!”

The old man is stricken helpless; and for the moment, the child can only run hither and thither, wringing her hands, and throwing them wildly up and down in the air, as she moans—

“Oh, what shall I do? Mother! mother! come back from Heaven and help me!”

CHAPTER II.

TONGUES OF FLAME.

YES, it had come—in a more awful aspect than even that in which her imagination had painted it. The fire had come!

The child—standing there with the full sense of her position, the flames before her, her father’s guilt acknowledged, himself helpless and despairing, her little brother’s cry ringing in her ears—felt, for an instant, her soul give way to the madness it had been so long struggling against. It was not in prayer she made that wild appeal for help to her dead mother—no, it was her soul rising within her, passionately resisting the cruel hand that had fallen so heavily—too heavily for her child’s strength to bear. Then, as if that piercing cry had rent its way through heaven’s

gate, letting thence a breath of pure air issue, she felt a sudden calm playing like a cool breeze around her heated brow—it drove off the madness, and left her strong for thought and action.

“Duke! ’Duke! I’m coming!”

The boy’s cries for help cease. He has heard her. The old man, as he leans on the bed, paralysed mind and body by the awful consequence of his crime, is suddenly startled to his senses and his feet by that loud, clear, ringing, childish shout—a shout that, in its shrill treble, rises high above the deafening roar like a challenge from a power mighty as the raging fire itself—sent by God into that small body to combat with and quell it. And the trembling man obeys that voice which calls him to take arms against himself; and soon he is running hither and thither at her word, and watching for every gesture of her hand as his destiny.

There is not even pain in her voice now. The almost cheerful tone is not forced. Relief in action has come to her as to all brave souls: fearful enough—but still relief. No longer has she to struggle with a nameless, creeping terror—no, she sees now a living enemy to grapple with, hand to hand, to whom she can give war-cry for war-cry.

From the end of the long landing where they are, the flames come leaping towards them, catching at the torn paper of the wall and the loose heaps of pam-

phlets. It is but the work of a few minutes to unroll a lot of damp, mouldy carpet, throw it down, and stifle the flames under it. Then they clear the landing, as far as it is safe to venture, from the books and rolls of paper by throwing them out of the window into the little back-yard.

The breeze from the open window drives back the smoke and flame, and enables them to bear the stifling, pungent atmosphere, and to work; but it also feeds the fire. They see that, and they shut the window, but are compelled instantly to re-open it. They cannot live else: even with that help it is difficult to breathe. But through the thick, suffocating, yellow vapour, thus partially drawn aside, they perceive, between them and the child's door, a seething and crackling gulf of fire right through the flooring. Directly under that spot is the lumber closet, and the miserable father knows the fire has been too well laid there to be soon quenched by their feeble efforts.

But some new current of air drives the smoke along on one side of the landing, and up the stairs to the attics. A door has been opened; Constance catches a glimpse of a little white figure standing in the opposite doorway, and the sight stimulates her fast-failing strength, and rouses her from the almost irresistible pressure of despair that the first glimpse of that fiery gulf produced.

“We are coming, darling! keep back! we are coming!”

The father, though he never ceased working at her word or gesture, felt his own efforts weak beside hers.

They had changed characters—he was the child, she the man. Hale and hearty though he was, he had never used himself to hard work; while Constance, whose strength had never been dissipated by luxury or idleness, had lifted his bales, and on dark winter mornings, when no one could see (for Mr. Chorley would not have liked that), had often taken down the heavy shutters of the shop. From her straight figure and upright walk the children of the town had nicknamed her “the poplar,” or the “little poplar;” and to-night, as her lithe, agile body swayed from side to side, avoiding the smoke and flames as she worked, she seemed the very spirit of that desolate, murmuring tree, as it turns to lash the wind that frets it.

On they went—the child and the fire—now both for a moment sinking exhausted, and then at the least sign of returning strength in each other, rushing again to the combat with redoubled force. One minute she drives it before her, smothering the flames as she goes with damp carpet; at times, even with her feet and hands, still striving to reach the side of the abyss, and shouting every minute to the trembling boy with a hopeful, ringing voice.

Another minute, and the fire bursts out afresh on

either side, compelling the boy to retreat and shut the door against even his father and sister, and forcing Constance herself back irresistibly — nay, even licking her dress with tongues of flame. But, snatching up her skirt and rumpling it suddenly with her fearless hands, she was able to retreat in safety — sick, breathless, and exhausted.

“Father, water! Quick! we must have water!”

He stirs not. A new horror has seized him.

“Father, make haste! What is it? You don’t mean that —?”

“There isn’t any: I let it off! Oh, Constance! what must we do?”

“Did you throw away the buckets I drew for the wash?”

“No! where are they? — in the yard?”

“Yes! Oh, make haste, father! make haste, or it will be too late!”

She saw him tremble at the double meaning of those words, „too late,” and a thrill of pity for him went through her heart.

„Father!” she whispered, as his foot was on the stairs, and as she drew fresh life from the window, „let’s work hard, and put everything right again, and no one shall ever know how it began.”

New hope and new terror (for, in the anguish and remorse produced by the sight of his son’s danger, he had forgotten the possibility of his own discovery and punishment) quickened the father’s feet, and he was

back with the water before Constance thought he had unfastened the yard-door. But almost fatal had been the delay as it was. The heat, smoke, and noise increased. The boy's cries became fainter and hoarser from behind the door which he dared not open; and the old man grew more and more distracted and unfit to act, as he saw the growing impossibility of removing the obstacle he had raised between him and his darling. He could do nothing but watch helplessly from the stairs how the fire rushed on and up, with a roar of exultation. But that roar is answered. Again that tiny, shrill voice rings through the house, dauntless as ever —

„We are getting on, darling! Keep back till I come! Open the door when I tell you. Father, we can't put the fire out—I must go through it and fetch him! The screen—quick! the screen—from the top landing! We must make a bridge across. Perhaps it may shut out the fire for a minute!”

She cannot repress a shudder as she watches the leaping and quivering bursts of flame and smoke, and sees piece after piece of the reddened boards of the flooring drop inwards at the least touch, making the cavity still larger. But she profits now by her reading, of the evening before, in that book which her father had examined for a very different purpose.

While he fetches the screen, the child hurriedly soaks the blankets that they had previously fetched from

the beds. She spreads two of them on the floor. She wraps another—the smallest—around her: she puts one aside for her father; and then empties the buckets on the carpets, which have hitherto helped to protect this part of the landing.

“Put that blanket on, father!” she cried, as he returned staggering under a great red screen. “That book says you don’t catch fire so. Now help me to wrap these blankets round the screen. And now, father, you keep that side, and help me to push it along as far as you dare go.”

But the old man can dare a great deal with her now. Creeping along the floor on their hands and knees (where they discover they breathe more freely), they push the screen before them; and they get nearer and nearer, though the smoke is stifling, the heat terrible!

The screen approaches the gulf—it is pushed across the edge, and they are conscious they are shutting down the fire, inch by inch; and still, with averted heads and panting breasts, they push it on till it is nearly across, and they can bear no more—not even though they know not whether the end will catch on the opposite side as they let it go. But no, it has *not* reached the cross-beam, which is its only safe resting-place; the slight flooring edge on which it caught crumbles away with a thousand brilliant morsels scattered from its burning side, as the end of the screen slips off and begins to sink.

The old man wrings his hands in despair, and then he crawls back, more dead than alive, to the window, to get fresh breath from the wind that is pouring in; and the boy, as he crouches down on the other side of the door, listening to the preparations for his deliverance, hears the hiss of the dripping end of the blanket as it falls over from the sloping screen. But, in an instant, Constance plunges her hand unhesitatingly through the rotten canvas-work of the screen right into the fire; and, heedless of the torture, she grasps the framework and stays the frail bridge in its downward course. Once more it is raised, but her strength is not sufficient to push it more securely on to the beam.

„Father! father!” she screams hoarsely. He comes from the window again, and while she holds it up he pushes it safely on to the cross-rafter. O the grateful burst of the child’s heart as she cries at last, “Duke! Duke! Come!—you are safe!”

But there is no answer. She springs across the screen, pushes the door, but can see nothing within. Presently she feels something at her feet. The boy has fainted, but she has him up in her arms instantly, and to the window, which is a little open, and he revives and tries to smile as he sees who looks upon him.

O that face! O those eyes drowned in tears of agony! They shine like liquid fire—they burn and burn their beauty into the boy’s soul, until he grows self-for-

getful, and falls to wondering whether God has already taken Constance for Himself, and arrayed her in angel glory.

The frail bridge has to be re-crossed, and Constance is aware it will not bear them both at once.

„Quick, darling! keep to the wood in the centre!” she cries. „Father!—he is coming, father!”

„My boy!” is almost upon the old man’s lips. But the black smoke, and the sickening odour of the blankets, warn him, and he cries out, „Oh God! The fire will be through in a moment!”

He had checked it by covering the hole Constance had made, but now the entire fabric was fast going. He saw, and shouted—

„Quick! give him to me, Constance! Don’t you come yet. Hold him out as far as you can, and I’ll take him.”

It is done! The boy is safe—safe in his father’s arms—but the screen bursts. In an instant Constance is driven back into the boy’s bed-room—is compelled to shut the door—and she remains there, divided from father, brother, perhaps life itself, by a barrier which, momentarily subdued, now springs up with irresistible fury, and follows her with mocking laughter.

But what is that to him—the father—who is out in the street—out in the pure, invigorating wind—trembling over his joy, like a robber over his lawless wealth?

„Constance — where's Constance?" are the first words on the boy's lips when he revives.

The father starts — *not* at he thought of what might now be her fate — no, though he would regret that, too, if he had more time, but that her name has roused in his mind a recollection of far more importance to him. He puts the boy down, saying —

„Yes, yes, call the neighbours. Have a ladder put up to the window for her — but take care, my boy, for God's sake, take care of yourself, take great care! Mind, I forbid you to come into the house." As the little fellow ran off, his father muttered to himself, in a hollow voice, Now, „Daniel Chorley, save yourself, or you are ruined for ever! If you can't put out the fire, you must, at any cost, remove the traces of your own work."

And never did man more heroically brave fatigue, or pain, or danger, than did he now, while engaged in undoing the many and ingenious arrangements he had made for securing the prosperity of the fire.

With singed hair, once so white and silvery — blackened face — blistered hands — dry, burning lips — reddened, smarting eyes — bruised and bleeding limbs — he fought his way from point to point, and so at last into the shop, which he had calculated would have been the first to take fire from the closet, through its thin timber walls. But, in fact, the shop had only just now been touched, through the opening cracks of

the woodwork. He tore down the curtains and the suspended paper—some of it just as it was beginning to blaze—and he fearlessly trod out the flame; then, remembering the previous success up-stairs, he ran for a wet cloth, which he tried to hang against the breach the fire was making, but could not manage it; there was nothing to hang the cloth upon, and he was too nervous to invent a support. The smoke and the fire were also again driving him back, and overpowering him; but he pulled away the books from the adjoining shelves; and he swept, with frenzied hands, everything that might readily burn from off the counter; and then, as he saw a new fire spring up where he had left some smouldering paper, and which had been fanned by a freshly-entering breeze, he again rushed upon it with an almost insane frenzy when, to his inexpressible relief, he heard voices calling out cheerily to him—

“All right, neighbour—here’s help. Leave it to us now. Come out—come!”

“Thank God! thank God!” devoutly murmured the sincerely-thankful man. “Oh, neighbours, save the property!—save the books! I have done my utmost. Water!—I am perishing with thirst! Give me some water!”

And while friendly hands fetched him a glass of the most delicious nectar that ever passed mortal lips, he had a vague consciousness of a great crowd of men

—some with water-buckets — and of cries in the street, and of the rolling of the wheels of approaching fire-engines, and of his being led forth, with great interest and sympathy, into a neighbour's house, and of some one saying to him, "Pray be at ease, Mr. Chorley, there is really no danger. We shall soon put down the fire; you have nearly quenched it yourself!" and, above all, of the exclamations and interchanges of remarks—"The brave old gentleman!" "Did you see how he was struggling with the fire?" "Yes—yes." "He's insured, too!" All this he was conscious of, in a dreamy kind of way; and he was happy, for (and that was the only thought he could now dwell on) he was safe!—his character safe!—his crime unsuspected! Who knows? perhaps he was even to benefit by the calamity! That thought wonderfully increased his recovery.

Not once, while his own future was thus at stake, had he recollected Constance—the brave, heroic child whose fortitude had alone inspired him with the hope or the strength to save the boy or his own reputation. But now her image rushed back upon him, and he started with no feigned alarm—

"The girl! Constance! Where is she?"

Two or three faces were around him; they looked from one to another, and answered in a condoling manner, which, had it been 'Duke they were speaking of, would have driven the father mad; but, as it was

only Constance, he took their words as they were meant — kindly — consolingly.

“Don’t be alarmed, Mr. Chorley. They’ve got the ladder up, but the window-sash was jammed fast, as though forced up in a great hurry by the poor thing, and there it stuck; but they have broken it away now, and are getting in. She can’t help them — but I daresay she’s only fainted. Take another glass of wine, neighbour, and don’t fear, they’ll manage it, That brave boy of yours is safe with them.”

Mr. Daniel Chorley turned his head away and drank the wine, feeling as proud as if the praise of his “brave boy” were his own personal property.

CHAPTER III.

THE LITTLE POPLAR.

WHEN Constance found herself cut off from her father and brother by the fire — hemmed in and gazed on at every side by a fearful death — she felt all her sudden and preternatural strength forsake her, and became once more the helpless, frightened child. She stood a moment staring with wild eyes through the fire, to see if there was not a firm inch of the screen to rest her foot on if she dared to venture, but it curled up like paper, and fell bit from bit; and she turned sick with the noisome smell of the burning

blankets; so she shut the door, and staggered back into the room. She clutched with desperate fingers at the slightly-open window; but, though it moved a little higher up, that was all it would do; it stuck fast there, and became only the more inextricably immovable from the frantic way in which the child strove to push it open wide enough for her to look out and see if she might leap down. Failing in the attempt on the window, she yielded utterly, and slid down upon the floor, not utterly senseless — better, far better, had she been so — but with just enough remaining consciousness to feel her fearful position to its fullest extent, without being able to battle against it.

The fire made great progress, and soon got into the chamber through the thin lath-and-plaster wall over the door; a beam across the ceiling of old, tindery wood, reaching from the door to the window, began to be wrapped about, through its whole length, with thin, darting, intermittent flames.

Constance, as she lay there directly under it, was only vaguely aware of the crackling of the dry wood and of a vivid, blinding light, which made her long for any kind of darkness, even that of death; but she felt that she must die before the fire reached her. What with the aching of her limbs, the pain of her hands and feet, and the violent throbbing of her head, she felt that to live and be at ease again was impossible. She must die, and the faintness that

was creeping over her seemed like the approach of death—and she tried to pray. But her mind wandered—not to the fire—she was hardly aware of its presence—but far back into the past—as minds will wander at such times, as though seeking for the other end of life to join to this, that they may hold up the finished circle to look at.

Minutes became hours as she lay there, blind to the light, deaf to the noise, in that twilight of death that was gathering in her mind. What the night would be when it came, whether it had moon or stars, she questioned not, but watched the shadows lengthening, and was still.

Now it seemed to her that she stood at her mother's death-bed, straining her ears to catch the last words. How distinctly she heard them *now*!—She repeated them over to herself, as she had done many and many a time before. “Constance, when your life is bitter to you, child, and you long for death, think of the little helpless charge I leave you, and live for him as I have lived for you.” The heart yearns to answer to that—“Mother, I will! I will!” and the child tries to move her limbs, but the sight of that burning beam paralyses her; the monster she has striven with all the night has her in its power now, and stands over her with a gigantic flaming sword, hovering ready to drop on and crush her. She might escape that sword had she but strength to do and to will; but her mind

seems lost in some region between life and death, and not a sign to guide it back.

But now she bursts out into wild, hysteric laughter—what is it she sees? A face—a human face! Beautiful, O how beautiful, to the child, because it is human! Once more all her senses rush back, just to let her pulses throb with life, to let her ears drink in the exquisite music of a human voice, to let her feel herself wrapped about by strong human arms—and there they leave her. And when again consciousness returned, it was in a dull, heavy way, and she fell into a quiet, calm sleep, from thorough exhaustion.

When she awoke she was herself again, and could turn over in her mind all the events of the night up to the time when her father parted from her; but beyond that there was a blank. She opened her eyes to see where it was she had been laid down. And, without turning her head, she could tell, by the pattern of the paper on the wall, that she was in Mr. Fleck's parlour, and she knew she must have been carried there from the fire. She was going to give way to the sleep that was again stealing over her, when she suddenly thought of her father. Tears stole down her cheeks as she remembered that perhaps, while she lay in that sweet rest, he was hiding in some corner of the street, a prey to remorse and grief; and then the child sickened with terror at the new dread

—“Perhaps they have found him out, and taken him to prison!”

She rose upon her aching arm, and looked round. There stood Mr. Daniel Chorley, the centre of an admiring group, relating eloquently the breaking out and the progress of the fire. He told of his alarm at the first discovery of the awful fact; of his efforts and danger while saving his children; and, as he drew towards the end, where his story grew more exciting, because it was more true, his cheeks glowed and his eyes flashed as he remembered that at this point, at least, he *was* the hero he described. Just then the agent of the insurance office, heated and alarmed, bustled in, and asked many rapid questions, and received from the bystanders earnest and enthusiastic replies; and he was so moved by the concurring testimonies, that he took off his hat and went to the old gentleman, and said—

“I must thank you, Mr. Chorley, in the name of the office, and before all present, for your courageous, admirable conduct.”

And then there was a burst of applause, and people came up and shook the old gentleman by the hand, and said so many kind things to him, that he, who was at all times a susceptible man in anything concerning his own personal shame or glory, was quite overpowered with the sense of his nobleness, and he turned away with tears in his eyes.

He would not have turned that way at such a moment had he thought of meeting the glance that awaited him — a glance which, mournful and stern as the eye of an accusing angel, stopped the course of those ignoble tears, and drove them back in shame to their base source.

The old gentleman's health had now to be drunk, and many more compliments were paid; but the child saw nothing more, heard nothing more, but turned her face to the wall, loathing life.

CHAPTER IV.

STUDYING THE MAP.

ONE evening Constance sat alone in the room behind the shop. She was looking at a map upon her knee, and now and then she concealed it beneath her work, and, leaning her head against the fire place, fell into deep, sad thoughtfulness.

Some weeks had passed, and wonderfully had Mr. Chorley recovered from the effects of the fire. The tide of fortune had come — somewhat differently, it must be owned, from what he had anticipated — but still it had come, and he was thankful — very thankful. His business had made a sudden leap forward, for every one took a pleasure in showing their sympathy with his misfortune, and their admiration of his cour-

age, by coming to his shop to make some new purchase, or to give him some new order.

That afternoon the agent had been with his notebook, and looked at the damaged property. He happened to drop in at Mr. Chorley's tea hour, when the room was filled with the fragrance of the hot buttered cakes and the Mocha coffee, which were always irresistible to Mr. Rowbotham, and which Mr. Chorley, though he preferred tea himself, happened, quite accidentally—so he said—to have on the table that afternoon. It scarcely needed Mr. Chorley's persuasive voice to make him sit down and refresh himself before going to business. In the course of conversation, Mr. Chorley remarked that he had drawn up a careful estimate of the injured property for his own use; and Mr. Rowbotham, who disliked trouble, requested to see it, and, as he glanced it over, declared he would encroach no longer on Mr. Chorley's time by needlessly going over these items again. So business, without seeming to be business, was quickly grappled with, and soon over. It was not a case, Mr. Rowbotham felt, for rigid scrutiny into the exactitude of every particular of the loss, or into the precise amount attached to each item. Was it not plain that, but for the brave old gentleman's devotion and personal risk, the office must have had to pay three or four times the amount? The agent felt it was not only absurd, but lowering to the dignity of

the office and his own self-respect, to sit there chafing with so estimable a man, so hospitable a host, and so old a customer. Accordingly, he accepted Mr. Chorley's estimate with entire good-will, and wrote beneath it, "I am satisfied this is correct, and that, if it be consistent with the views of the directors to make some additional acknowledgment of the zeal exhibited in saving the property in danger, this is eminently a case for their attention. It is impossible to speak too highly of the conduct of Mr. Daniel Chorley."

When he had written these lines he handed the paper over to that worthy gentleman, who read and then wiped his eyes with a fine and snowy-white cambric handkerchief—another of Mr. Chorley's gentlemanly, but innocent, luxuries. After a while he said, in a mild, melancholy accent—

"The sum is—then—without the workmen's bills—"

"Fifty-nine pounds, ten shillings, and sixpence."

"Well, Mr. Rowbotham, I cannot exactly thank you, because your first duty is to your office; but I do say this—it is pleasant to have to deal with a gentleman. I say no more!"

At all events, he could have said nothing better to the purpose. The agent was a humbly-born, self-made man with a thriving income, and he was beginning to think of a lift in the social sphere, so that the idea of being esteemed a gentleman was pecu-

liarly pleasant to him. The fumes of the fancy ascended into his brain, and wound about it with as pleasant a sense of titillation as the aroma of the coffee had already exercised upon its material structure.

“You are an honour to the town, sir—an honour to human nature!” were the agent’s last words, as, two hours later, having finished his second tumbler of whisky-and-water, he shook hands with Mr. Chorley at the street-door.

But Mr. Chorley, though conscious of the existence of certain—(might he not say, practically slight?)—qualifications of the agent’s opinion, was, on the whole, very much of the same mind himself. Were there not undreamed-of depths of virtue and conscientiousness in his bosom, known only to himself? No one but he, for instance, knew how easily he could have made those figures relative to the damaged property ascend considerably higher, yet he had refused to do so. He wanted to get rid of that cursed secret debt which had long weighed him down, and, having got the requisite amount in full, with a kind of gentlemanly allowance of a few pounds over, he would seek no more from the office—no, not even although he had, as the agent said, saved the office hundreds by his own personal risk and heroism. “Well, well, on the whole it was a happy ending—safer, yes, safer, than if everything had turned out as he had intended.”

Yes, his only existing—and secret—difficulty was

disposed of. A debt of fifty pounds had been pressing heavily on the old gentleman for some time, and of late had become so threatening that it had materially helped to influence the mind of the worried debtor to the dangerous course he had taken. But even that was now removed during Fortune's smiling, open-handed mood.

Of the conversation between the two men Constance had lost not a word.

Strangely stern, as well as mournful, had the pale face become now; though with little 'Duke it never lost the supernatural beauty he had seen come upon it in the smoke and flames of that horrible night. The few days he remained at home he seemed almost to idolise her. He followed her about from room to room. He looked up silently in her face, sometimes putting up his lips for a kiss when he saw a tear glistening in her eyes; and he never rested an hour away from her side. But Mr. Chorley sent him back to school, and the girl lost the bit of sunshine that his presence made upon her life.

And yet his absence was, in some measure, a relief—a great relief to-night, when she sat there, watching the shadow of another coming event, with very much the same kind of feeling that she had watched and foreseen during the night of the fire. But this time she was prepared—or, rather, trying to prepare herself—for a much harder battle than she had fought

before, though, perhaps, 'Duke might not have understood it so.

She knew her time was come now; for she heard her father, who had busied himself in his accounts after the agent's departure, whistle a low, soft whistle, as he always did when he got up from his accounts satisfied. She rose, put the map in her pocket, folded up her work, and stood facing him as he entered the room, and said, in a firm, determined, yet rather husky voice —

„Father, I want to speak to you, please.“

But at that moment Mr. Daniel Chorley remembered that he had a most interesting engagement out of doors to supper, and that he must run up-stairs to dress without an instant's loss of time. He was stopped by the piercing tones, successively increasing in intensity, that followed him — “Father! father! father!”

“Well, well! What a plague the child is! Now, then, Constance,” he said, returning in an ill temper.

“Father, you told me that man was not going to pay you anything for the damage done by the fire.”

“Of course not. *He* doesn't pay; it's the office which pays. You don't understand these things, Constance.”

“Father, I'm afraid I do. You are to be paid, then, a great sum of money?”

“And if I am, what then? The office is willing.”

“Does the office know, father, that you set fire to your own house?”

What a terrible power there is sometimes in the simplest words! I don't think anybody had ever yet seen Mr. Chorley in a genuine passion. He was too dignified, too gentlemanly. He might cut you with the keen razor of his sarcasm, and then pour into the wound the corrosive sublimate of his kindness, but all in a quiet, self-controlled way that made you respect the appearances of the man, while you winced under the reality of his torture. It was sad that a child's words—and those the words of his own child—should be the first to unsettle so desirable a state of things. For a moment his face appeared at the white heat of passion; then, as his knees shook, and his eyes glanced quivering round to see if there were any listeners, he started forwards, dropped his two hands on the child's shoulders, and pressed her neck convulsively between them, until she screamed—

“Father! father! don't kill me!”

„Hush, I say—hush! Say those words again, that you said just now, as long as you live, and—”

The child saw in his eyes and face all that he hesitated to say, and from that moment felt she was alone in the world. To the dead mother succeeded a worse than dead father! The child's last earthly hope of a father's cherishing love passed away; and there remained but the terror of his presence, the fear,

the sickening consciousness of a secret existing between them which forbade all hope of future mutual confidence. He, on his part, presently repented of his violence, and began to understand—very unwillingly, it must be owned—that here was a new difficulty to be faced, and one that he could not help, in his inmost soul, resenting that it should dare to be a difficulty to him. But he began to apologise—to soothe Constance's fears—to defend himself from the terrible *imputation* conveyed by her words. That was his phrase—"imputation." When ugly facts can't be resolved away into air we talk of them as imputations, and find comfort in the sound.

"Now sit down, child, and let me explain to you a bit."

"Yes, father."

"I have paid this office a good deal of money—more than the sum they are going to pay me in return."

"Yes, father," said the child, fancying, she knew not why, there must be something in that.

"When the trade was better, and the stock larger, I insured for the right amount, and I didn't alter the amount when times grew worse and the stock less."

"No father, I know—you told me once you didn't like the office to see that you were losing ground in the business."

"Pooh, nonsense! I never said anything of the kind

—couldn't have said it! But you won't listen, Constance."

"Oh yes, father, I will, I will!" and the eyes were dropping big tears as this was said. But Mr. Chorley, communing with his own spirit, saw he was engaged in a hopeless task—that there was before him, in that little shabby child, an inexorable logician, before whom all his pleasant self-delusions dispersed into vacancy, and against whom, as they touched, all his worshipped idols were sure to be broken in pieces. So he said, in his grandest manner, and with a reproachful tone not common with him, and therefore only the more forcible—

"Constance, you do not listen to me with proper respect. You don't understand my actions. In time you will. Wait, and be silent; you are but a child. Wait, I say, and be silent."

There was just the least touch of menace accompanying these last words. The child felt it, and shivered; but she had only two alternatives—that of softening him and bringing him to repentance, and another so bitter that she would not yet yield to it. Looking up into his darkening face, she cried—

"Father, you will not take this money — oh, dear, dear father, promise me you won't, and then I will never let anybody know that you—"

Here the shaking, warning hand was raised, and she paused.

“I must, Constance! Don’t you see I must?”

“Why, father?”

“Because they would know I must have a motive if I refused—and there could be but one.”

“Oh, father, tell them you did wrong, and you are sorry.”

Mr. Chorley got up with a loud laugh—the idea was so ridiculous. Yet there was no mirth in the sound, or in his feelings as he paced up and down the room.

“Do, father, do!” pleaded the child’s earnest voice. “They know how hard you worked to put out the fire. And I will tell them more, and then you’ll never be afraid of people finding it out; and, oh, father, you won’t always look upon me as you did just now.”

“Constance, are you mad? Pray be quiet.”

“Father, I cannot, I cannot. Tell them anything you like, but don’t take this money. Say you don’t want it.”

“But I do want it. I shall be ruined without it. I owe it all.”

“Then, father, let us go away to a fresh place. Oh, I will so work for you, and so—so—love you, father, if you will let me, and ’Duke shall be everything to you; and you needn’t mind me at all.”

“I tell you, in one word, it is impossible. Don’t you know where I am going this evening?”

“No, father.”

“Why, the neighbours have got up a supper for me by subscription among themselves on purpose to meet me, and to compliment me, and all that. Very kind of them, I’m sure. Would you have me ungrateful? You see, Constance, that everything now might be so nice and comfortable, if you wouldn’t be so silly. Here’s the trade improving, debts about to be paid, neighbours treating me with increased respect, I — I may say, honour — yet you want me to go and spoil everything, and say to the whole town — ‘No, no, my dear friends, you are all wrong! I shan’t take this money! I don’t want this trade! I can’t eat this supper!’ Now I appeal to you, Constance, is it likely that anybody in his senses would do that?”

The child made no answer. She sank into a chair, and her arms dropped on one of its arms, and her head followed, and she forgot father, mother, world, everything, in the all-engrossing certainty of despair. Now, at last, she knew her father.

Mr. Daniel Chorley watched her awhile, then slipped quietly away to his bedchamber, and in half-an-hour afterwards was walking into the great room of the “Red Lion,” up-stairs, and in the reception that there awaited him he forgot all his home annoyances.

How glad Constance was to be alone again! But no more gazing into the fire now! No more hopes — scarcely fears! The worst had come. She had been expecting it, and was prepared to meet it — at least,

she thought she was—and she began to act blindly submissive to some previously formed resolve.

She sat down to write to her father, first of all, because it was the hardest thing of all to do. The tears would patter down on the paper, and the ink would run where the tears fell. She could hardly read it herself when it was finished, but it was too late to write another: so she folded it up, blotted and blistered as it was, and she stood at the street-door with it till the pot-boy came by with the next-door beer, and then gave it into his charge for her father. That done, she pinned up her skirt, and bustled about, doing all her morning's work. Then she laid his supper, and made up the fire to last some hours. After all was done that she could think of, she took her candle and went up-stairs. She spread a little shawl on the bed, and began to make up a bundle of a heap of 'Duke's clothes that were to have been sent to the school the next day, and of her own scanty wardrobe. She went and looked at her new Sunday frock, hanging behind the door, and, after some hesitation, took it down, folded and laid it in the shawl, her hands trembling as she did so; for she knew her father had bought it for her to look respectable when he took her to church, and she feared she had no right to use it for any other purpose. But she thought God would forgive her—she had so little clothes else. Then a small box, containing all her worldly treasures,

must be sorted, for it was too big to put in the bundle. How tenderly she took up one little worthless trinket after another! How hard it seemed to part with any, though she knew she must! Once, as she took up something from a corner of the box, a hot mist came before her eyes, and would not let her see it; but she knew what it was that lay there in her hand so soft and silky—a tress of dark hair—her mother's hair—and again the heart struggled and resisted; but the will does not give way even to this, and the hair is put by determinedly, though very tenderly, in the Sunday frock pocket, as though it were too holy a thing to be carried about on common working-days.

And now the bundle was tied up, and she went to the bit of broken glass to put her bonnet on. The child started as she met the reflection of big, serious eyes, and looked behind her, for the face seemed more like her mother's than her own. Ah, she knew then—comprehended then—her own great change. Like seedling plants in the tropical regions, that spring up almost instantaneously to maturity, under the fierce glow of the sun and the nourishing dews or rain, she had grown in intellectual stature and force of will during the fiery and tearful ordeal she had passed through. And she knew it now—now that she was compelled to estimate herself, and measure accurately all her resources. Yes, she knew she was no longer a child, but a premature woman; and she looked back

in astonishment, vainly trying to recognise her former self, divided from her already by so impassable a gulf.

Well, all was done. She was ready! Ready—for what? Again the heart began to swell rebelliously, and the eyes to dart frantically from one familiar object to another in the bare dreary bedroom—the window with the one pot of some kind of seed that she was always watching for, but which never came up—the prints on the wall—the bed where her mother had so often knelt down with her and taught her to say her prayers. “Where, oh, where should she say her prayers to-night?” To silence that frightened, questioning heart that was so much trouble to her, because it was so weak and childish still, while all the rest of her had grown so old and enduring, she said to it, “Why not here?” So she knelt down. But she dared not pour out all her emotion as she had been used to do by that bed, but prayed with tightly-closed eyes, her usual evening prayer, and then raising her head, she cried aloud—

“Oh, mother! mother! is it right what I am doing? Tell me if it isn’t! Oh, mother, try and tell me!”

She stood up trembling, almost expecting, in her childish faith, some fearful sign. But none came; only the moon shone in at her window with a more calm and tender beauty than before. So, taking her bundle on her arm, she put out her candle and glided down the darkened stairs.

She touched the handle of the street-door, and then hesitated. She had forgotten to put his slippers on the fender where he liked them put. Besides, the fire must want seeing to. So she dropped her bundle on the mat, and opened the parlour-door. How bright and comfortable the place looked, with its new carpet, and pictures, and those fairy-like muslin curtains that half hid the linnet's cage! The cat, that lay curled before the fire, jumped up with her loudest purr as she entered; and the linnet, awakened by the blaze she made in stirring the fire, dropped its leg, extended its wings lazily, and sang two or three sleepy notes by way of greeting.

Everything spoke so eloquently to the trembling little heart of home—home comforts, home happiness, home peace—that it would no longer have its grief thrust back upon it, but broke out into sobs; and the weary body sank down upon the rug, and the weary head upon the stool, and the dry, aching eyes could not keep back the pressing tears any longer, so let them flow as thick and fast as they liked. Poor child! She had thought she had nothing to regret leaving—that there was nothing to regret her; and as she packed up her few things, and went about her last home duties, lo! there sprang up on every side something to claim her love, and to make the farewell more bitter to her!

But she would not long give way. She sat up on the stool and wiped her eyes; while the cat, between two

dozes, glanced, with a puzzled and somewhat severe air, from her face to the comfortable fire, as if she thought the child's wretchedness inexplicable, if not wilful.

"Pussy," said the child, stroking the cat fondly the while, "I know you would let them half starve you, or cruelly beat you, before you'd run away; and so would I. But don't you remember, pussy, when the children at the big house teased your little kitten, you took it up in your teeth in the night, and brought it to me? Yes, the little one must be thought of before us, mustn't it, pussy?"

What was the child now meditating? She wiped her eyes again; and the cat declined to argue, and yawned, and stretched herself, while Constance went to the cupboard for a lump of sugar, to stick between the bars of the linnet's cage. She could not resist opening the door to stroke its feathers for the last time.

"Poor little thing! who'll feed you when I am gone?" she murmured, as it hopped upon her wrist.

"But I won't leave you. We'll go together — you your way, and I mine. Go in there, and you shall be set free as soon as it is light." She put the bird gently into the empty basket which she carried on her arm, to hold what provisions she should have to buy on the long, mysterious journey she was meditating.

"Good-bye, pussy! I know you're safe. You won't be starved, as dickey might be, because you're wanted for the mice. Good-bye."

Again she looked round, but uselessly, for she was blind with tears; and then, turning away, she felt for her parcel on the door-mat, and, hanging it on her arm, she crossed the threshold of the home she was never again to enter.

Her note was put into Mr. Daniel Chorley's hands just when he was going to return thanks after the supper. He knew the handwriting of the address, and would have been moved and agitated by the circumstance, but that he was determined nothing should interfere at that critical, that glorious moment; and so he put it into his waistcoat-pocket, and prepared himself for his speech, and delivered it, and never was he more expressive. Everybody felt that the "old gentleman" had come out even better than they expected, notwithstanding they had expected much. And so the note was forgotten until he got home, and had knocked at the door, and obtained no answer. Then he wondered what Constance was about—and then he remembered the note. Hurriedly, by the light of the gas-lamp, he read the blurred epistle:—

"DEAR FATHER, — Good-bye. The key is at Mrs. King's, next door. Pray to God, father, and He will bless you as He has blessed me, and He will tell you what to do, as He has told me. Don't write to me any more. You can never love me, any more. Oh, father, I wouldn't leave you if I wasn't sure of that! And if you don't love me it will make

you worse now if I stay at home, now that I know you set fire —”

The father ground his teeth, his face visibly whitened, and an oath escaped him such as your very respectable man alone can give utterance to when he is driven to the unwonted relief. He looked up at and around the gas-lamp, as though to be sure there was no living eye now reading with him the fatal words which the child had, in her straightforward simplicity, first written, then, remembering how angry he would be, had tried to blot out, but ineffectually; and so they stared the guilty man in the face, in all their horrid directness. But he must read on.

“Father, I shall never come back. Don’t seek me. No one shall ever hear anything about you from me. I won’t even tell ’Duke. Dear father, be sure of that, and don’t think any more about me. Good-bye, father.

“Your affectionate daughter,
“CONSTANCE CHORLEY.”

Mr. Chorley considered a bit with himself. She had promised she would not reveal what she knew. That was well. Still better, he felt that she would keep her promise. She had especially mentioned ’Duke. The father trembled as he thought of that contingency — his boy learning of the guilty act, and showing it, possibly, by leaving him, as Constance had left. She would not tell ’Duke, she said. How could she, if she were going away at once and for ever? Ha! did

she meditate—no, no, she could not, dared not! But he would visit the school in the morning, and take precautions. And as he went up to bed he began to think, while undressing himself, of what he should say, and to perceive that he should be obliged to say unpleasant things about Constance's wilfulness and ingratitude, in explanation of her disappearance; and he was vexed at that necessity. It was too bad to have such an almost base thing imposed upon him. He felt quite troubled about it, as he got into bed, and tried vainly to compose himself. But after a while the reverberations of the cheers in the great room, the overflowings of the radiance and the social glow of the evening he had just spent, came back like a kind of Indian summer, and enveloped his whole being; and so he went off, at last, into a sleep, that seemed to have a voice for him, and to whisper, "Come, come, you are not so bad, after all. There's many a worse man than you in the world." And he took such assurances, as they are generally taken, to mean—"You are a good fellow, Daniel Chorley, at heart—on the whole, one of the best fellows breathing." And so he slept in peace.

CHAPTER V.

THE PLAGUE-STONE OF ABERFORD.

WITHIN sound of the sweet minster bells, and within sight of the grey old minster towers, the old Plague-stone of Aberford lay, gathering thin yellow moss about its base, and rearing its broad bleached front high above the wayside reeds and grasses. In summer time, when the little patch of verdure beside it was fresh, and the little clump of hawthorns all in leaf, and the merry little brook clear and full, it was a pleasant and quiet spot to come to and meditate in the grey of Sabbath evenings, when the minster bells were ringing, and a soft violet bloom lay over all the wide expanse of heath. Lovers from the town made it a trysting-place, and its white surface was one maze of rudely carven letters, mostly linked together twos and twos.

Many a bitter parting had the old stone witnessed, and sometimes in the sweet spring weather, blossoms, faint and palely luminous, sprang up so suddenly and died so soon, that one could almost fancy them a flight of loving thoughts from one of those who had gone forth along that high road to return no more; and sometimes when the wind howled over the heath by night, and drove and tugged at the immovable old Plague-stone because it would not begone before it, like the rotten leaves at its feet, you seemed to hear

the wailing of a soul left standing there desolate, to watch some loved form lessening on the road, and to weep itself weary on the Plague-stone's cold rough breast.

Along this road two children were now journeying wearily.

The sun had just burst forth, and the light, fleecy clouds rolled off, leaving a sky of pale, tender blue spread out before them. The grass by the wayside was yet crisp with half-frozen dew, and the sweet air of the spring morning blew refreshingly upon the swollen eyes of the little wayfarers as they gazed upon the new world into which they were journeying hand-in-hand.

“Constance, may we rest when we get to that stone?”

“Yes, darling, and let the linnet go.”

They walked on, speaking no more till they reached the Plague-stone. There they took the bird from the basket, and stroked it, and kissed it with quivering lips.

“I wonder which way it will go?” said the boy, as he stood by the stone and held the bird aloft on his fingers.

At first it only shook its feathers as if to let the fresh air penetrate them, and remained still, looking round on the green fields enjoyingly. The boy shook his hand; the bird took a little flight round and round, then perched again on the boy's finger, looked inquiringly into the children's faces, as much as to say,

“Do you really want me to go?” and then broke out into delicious song.

The two looked at each other, and then at the bird, and then they burst into tears, and sat down together by the stone in silence.

“What must we do with it, Constance?” asked the boy at length, in a broken voice.

“Let it stay with us till it likes to go,” answered Constance, rising and holding out her hand.

“Come, 'Duke, we must push on, or we sha'n't get to the large place where I told you we must stop to-night.”

They had risen and moved a couple or more paces from the stone, when they heard a hoarse voice calling behind them, and they both stood still, trembling and clinging to each other.

The girl looked round: she saw a figure approaching from the turn in the road, and her knees shook; but she said, in a firm voice —

“'Duke, it's father. Don't cry — be a man! Remember all I told you.”

Another instant, and Mr. Chorley stood before them. The perspiration streamed down his face, his fine black clothes were covered with dust, and for a moment he was speechless with rage and lack of breath. Presently he gasped out —

“Constance — what — means this?”

“Father, I told you in the letter.”

“But 'Duke ——”

“Must go too, father.”

“Why?”

“Must I tell you before him, father?”

“Good God!” thought, almost said, the astounded man; “is this my daughter?”

But he was growing too infuriated to deal with any abstract speculations now. She was evidently bent on taking away the boy he so loved and worshipped — the treasured darling for whom he had ventured so much — the very apple of his eye. Pooh! it was ridiculous! But, unhappily, it was not the less true. There she stood, no longer shrinking in apprehension either of him or of her own thoughts, but protecting her brother as his mother might have protected him in the presence of some dangerous animal. Yes, he saw what was in her face — what was in her eye — and he trembled inwardly, and he would have cursed her had he dared. But she was armed with a perilous, deadly weapon. What should he do? Utterly baffled, unable to speak, the miserable man presently began to weep, and lo! both the children cried too — a melancholy company.

“Come, Constance, I will treat you as a woman. You shall have your own way; I won't follow or trouble you. But leave me 'Duke; I grow old, and cannot be deprived of both my children. I can't spare him.”

“You must, father.”

“Why, in Heaven’s name?”

“Because God says so. You will make him wicked, father! Kill me! kill me if you like, but I will say so, and God will punish you if you do! Oh, father! was it not God who gave you one chance, even at the last moment?—who prevented ‘Duke from being burned by—”

“Constance!” murmured appealingly the guilty man, turning deadly pale.

“Yes, father, I understand. May we, then, go in peace?”

„Are you determined to—to—”

“I am, father!”

Mr. Daniel Chorley buried his face in his hands. He to be brought to this!—to appear thus before his own children!—and yet to have no escape! Suddenly, however, he said to the child—

“Come back, then, with me both, and I will tell the whole truth, and make an end of it.”

“Oh, father, will you?—will you?—will you indeed?”

“I will.”

“And forgive me afterwards? Oh, father!” and the child was about to throw herself into his arms, when Mr. Chorley, moved by some new thought, or by a sense of failure as to a previous one, said huskily, and with an affectation of wounded pride—

“No, no, take your own way, and abide by the consequences.”

The child had not expected that, and it was the cruellest blow of all. She sobbed convulsively betwixt her every word as she said to the boy—

“Come then, 'Duke; kiss father, and bid him good-bye.”

And she withdrew a pace or two, as if conscious that the father and son would have a communion of heart in which she could not be permitted to share. And she sat down near the old Plague-stone and waited while the miserable man held the boy in his arms, and covered him with kisses, and begged him never to forget poor papa, and received again and again the boy's heart-broken assurances that he would not. And then the father took money from his pocket—all he had there—some gold among silver and copper, and gave the whole to the boy, who threw it on the ground passionately; and then the father had to pick it all up again, and to put it into the boy's pockets, and explain that his sister would want it; and then, with one more embrace, he set the boy down, and turned to go away.

“Father!” came thrilling after him, in a tone so full of childish agony that it penetrated to his very marrow—“Father!”

He turned—hesitated—then opened his arms, and Constance, with a strange, wild cry, flung herself upon

his breast, and kissed him, until he felt her arms tightening about his neck, and he got alarmed, and so he quietly unclasped them, and set her down; and she looked at him as she stood there, motionless, upright, and rigid; and then she looked not at him or anything else in the world, but stared blindly on; and then she laughed; and then there was another sad mingling and chaos of sobs and hysteric bursts from all the three before the child grew calm. But she did quiet herself at last; and then Mr. Daniel Chorley leaned back against a tree and waved them away, unable to speak more. Hand-in-hand they went, and he saw their gradually lessening forms moving further and further away from him, until at last, when he could only just distinguish one from the other, he saw them stop, and the taller one take up her frock to wipe away the tears of the shorter one, and kiss him, before they again recommenced their march.

And now they stood upon the summit of the distant hill; a moment more, and they would be lost to him for ever. He strained his eyes wildly after them, as though they must have the power still to keep in view those tiny specks that stood out against the pale blue sky. Could it be that in another moment they would disappear for ever?

For ever! The trees with their bursting buds, the birds swaying joyously on the branches, the little brook by the wayside dancing and gurgling with its

new tide of spring showers, the heaven in the sky above looking down lovingly into the heaven in those waters below, seemed all, with one voice, to cry, with a strange joy and triumph, "For ever!"

For ever! As the bright spring sun shone down, the earth between him and them seemed, in its glittering freshness, to smile at the parting as though it were a thing that Heaven rejoiced in, as it might rejoice for the saving of a soul. For ever!

O how the agonised heart turns and writhes, and vainly seeks to listen to the promptings of its better angel, as it whispers, "There is yet time! Save them! Confess all! Bring them back!" Even in its agony it is hardened against everything but the sense of shame — discovery — acknowledgment; and so he watches, and watches, as the specks grow more and more minute, and lo! they are gone! On, on into life! — children, and alone! On, on into the world!

CHAPTER VI.

OUT IN THE WORLD.

THREE days had gone by since the little brook and the birds in the little clump of hawthorns had sung so merrily to the old man who sat here and wept through the sunny morning hours. Three days had gone, and in that time April had come and breathed

upon the stone and wakened little pale constellations of primroses all about it.

Night was closing round the heath with great sweeps of black shadow and great gusts of angry wind. There had been service at the minster, and the little congregation seemed right glad to escape from the wild night into their homes without gossip or the customary saunter on the heath. O the delicious safety and warmth of home on such a night!

“Out in the world, children, and alone!”

Whence came that cry? There was one solitary figure, silver-haired and bent, which had made its way across the heath, and sat upon the old Plague-stone. It was one of the little minster congregation, for a Bible and Prayer-book lay on the ground beside him. Every moan of the wind made him start and shiver, for it seemed to him to be trying to utter some fearful tidings of little friendless, roofless children on the road. To be sure he had that evening heard the good old clergyman tell how the very sparrows went not uncared for and unwatched, but then, breaking in upon the comfort that thought gave him, came a still small voice, saying, “Into whose care gave I these little ones?” and the grey guilty head fell into the hands, and began listening again to the dismal shrieking of the wind.

O the dark, wild things that that wind seemed to hint at, as it hissed and wailed and bellowed about

his ears. Children and alone! What might not have happened to them in those three days?

Hark! How like a child's voice was that! While he listened with drops starting on his forehead, the wind suddenly became like wild mocking laughter, as if to say, "How knowest thou, thou hast a child left?" and began to make a movement in the grass of the heath that suggested to him horribly the flowing back of hair from childish brows pallid and dead by the wayside.

"O God! O God!" he cried; and rose, bathed in sweat, and set his face towards the road as if no power on earth could stay him from hurrying forth to seek them, and bear with them the punishment of his crime. But lo, while he leant upon his stick trembling in every limb, he heard footsteps near him, and immediately a sense of his position returned. Hastily taking up his Bible and Prayer-book he began to move homewards, and he had not made many paces before a smile came on his face, for he seemed to know as well as if he had heard the words, that those two honest Aberford townsfolk who passed him were saying, "The grand old man, see how he comes out to meditate and worship Nature, even on such a night."

So he passed down towards the town, leaning on his stick with his right hand, and holding his Bible and Prayer-book against his heart with his left,

and the lamp-lights and the merry minster bells gave him a pleasant welcome home.

And where were they who for three long days and two wild nights had travelled beyond sight of the lights of home and beyond sound of those dear minster chimes? Where were they, and what dangers beset them, that the wind wailed so dolorously round the old Plague-stone, as if calling for help and succour?

Behold where, even at this hour of the turbulent night, two little figures plash along on the road, silent, drenched, and desolate. Only three days of the world, yet what records does each pale, pinched, supernaturally aged face bear! They are silent—much too wretched to speak; but their hands clasp one another very tightly, and their little feet, as if for companionship, without effort step together. Splash—splash; it is the only sound they hear, and they listen to it till it seems to become a part of the watery silence. It is almost like the beat of a monotonous pulse, and they have become so used to it that their lips involuntarily count it. “One, two—one, two;” and each “one, two” clears about half a yard of the five miles. Weary little feet!—when will their journey end?

Suddenly they become aware that this pulse of the silence is not keeping the same time—that is to say they are counting three instead of two. They tighten

the hold of each other's hand and look down at their feet, still counting. The left have moved forward, "one;" now the right, "two;" and now, before the left again moves, there is a third splash. They dare not look back; they go on just the same, but their hearts beat more quickly. They feel they are not alone — some one or something is journeying with them along the dreary flats. Who or what is it?

The wind has ceased, yet the night is wild and ghostly. Clouds, huge and dark, roll over the sky in many a fantastic form. Even the tranquil stars add to the wildness of the scene, for, as they appear through small openings, they seem to be the eyes belonging to those cloud-giants. The moon is high and at its full, and is hung around by floating hills of snow. It floods all the level, drenched country with its white light. Here it lights up wet, glistening heaps of broken stone, and the black mouth of a stone quarry; here a field in which lies the dead body of a sheep that has died of the rot, and which, at the first peep of day, will bring the crows screaming over the flats in ravenous armies. Here a blighted, skeleton-like tree is reflected vividly in a black, glassy pool by the wayside; and there the shadow of the fingerpost projects itself right across the watery road. Then there is the road itself lying across the black-looking country like a curving stream. It is visible for miles, and for miles there is nothing upon it but

three figures — two little ones on in front, and a larger one following behind.

As is generally the case in moments of great fear, the ears of the children have become exceedingly sharp; and they notice that the mysterious splash, which has been getting nearer and nearer, and is now almost close up to them, has something strange about it. Though the splash itself is heavy, they do not hear the scrunch of the boot on the loose stones; it is like the fall of a naked foot. Closer and closer it comes; they are too frightened to run — too frightened to stop; so they go on as best they may, and presently, looking down on the wet road, they see, lying there beside them, the shadow of this unknown fellow-traveller. It is that of a man, short and thick-set; and he carries a stick over his shoulder, with a pair of boots slung at the end. They stop, the shadow stops too; they begin to run, and the shadow also runs, and a gruff, drawling voice calls after them —

“Don’t be afeard o’ me; I’m on’y a poor man as ’ud be glad o’ yer company, my young lady and gen’l’-man, in these yer lonesome parts.”

They hesitate and lag a little, but still keep in advance of the man, who, by his shadow, seems to limp a good deal.

“Come now, I say,” he goes on in the same drawl, “you surely aint afeard on a poor man as don’t want no more’n company; for now I don’t see no ’arm in

a young lady's and gen'l'man's stomics a-turning agin their A B C. Mine turned again it allis, and, if so be their stomics turned agin it, why I say as it's on'y nat'ral a young lady and gen'l'man shud make off. I say as it's a plucky thing on 'em to do; and I aint the one to split on 'em, not if I knowed their schoolmissus, and their schoolmissus says to me, 'John Hollis,' she says, 'here's two made off from my school, and if you'll bring 'em back you shall be 'andsome rewarded.' No, I aint the one to split on 'em if I did know jest where they was, and 'ad seen 'em yesterday mornin' a-sitting under an 'edge a-playin' with soverings, and then had the pleasure o' spendin' a evenin' in their company at a public—not I!"

Constance turned and looked at the man, and the man looked at her, with a mocking leer on his face. She recognised him at once as a militia-man who had come upon them while they were under a tree in a retired place counting their money. Mustering up all her courage, she turned towards him, and said, faintly—"What is it you want, please?"

"Well come now, I say," drawled John Hollis, keeping up with them with some difficulty, and breathing hard between each sentence; "I aint a beggar, yer know, but I'm a poor man as 'listed when he wasn't hisself for drink, and broke his poor wife's 'eart; and now, in consequence of hinjered 'ealth, 'as got 'is discharge from the army, and is now returnin'

'ome to 'is native willage, and 'is broken-'earted wife, and twelve starvin' children, without a penny in 'is pocket; and, as I said, he aint no beggar, but I make bold to say he aint above acceptin' 'elp from a young lady and gen'l'man as can play with soverings under an 'edge."

Though Constance thinks Mr. Hollis is remarkably young to be the father of so large a family, and though in the imperfect light she looks in vain to discover any signs of the "hinjured 'ealth" he speaks of in his broad fat face, she does not hesitate to draw out her purse, in the hope that a shilling will rid them of this unwelcome and loquacious companion.

"Indeed, sir," she says, "we have very little money to take us such a long way as we've got to go, but if that will be of any use—" And she held it out to him timidly.

"Well, really, now," he says in his satirical drawl, stopping their way, and holding the shilling in his great, coarse hand looking down at it with his head on one side—"well, really, now, what a kind young lady and gen'l'man to spare a shillin' to a poor fellow! Very 'an'some indeed! very 'an'some. I wonder what my wife'll say to me a-bringing 'ome such a lot o' money. Why look here, my dears, I'll tell you what she'll say"—and laying one hand on Constance's shoulder and the other on 'Duke's, he leans upon them with all his weight, and bends down till his hot, impure

breath, smelling of onions and tobacco, defiles their faces — “yes, I’ll tell you what she’ll say — when I go home my wife’ll say — I just hear her a-sayin’ of it — ‘John,’ my wife’ll say, ‘what have yer got to feed yer starvin’ children with?’ she’ll say. ‘A shillin,’ I’ll say, ‘as was giv’ me by a nice young lady and gen’l’man a-taking a walk one night across Markham’s Medders, and as I’d seen in the mornin’ a-playin’ with soverings under an ‘edge.’ Then my wife she’ll say, ‘Yer fool, I’d ‘a’ laid hold on the young gen’l’man’s arm,’ she’ll say” — and, to illustrate his meaning, he takes hold of ‘Duke’s arm in a playful manner, and fixes his eyes on Constance’s pale face — “‘and I’d ‘a’ twisted it round and round,’ she’ll say.” He gives ‘Duke’s arm a twist, and the boy utters a sharp cry, more in apprehension than real pain; but it is acute agony to Constance to hear it; and, throwing down her basket and bundle, she clutches the man’s sleeve with both hands, and gazes into his brutal face with white lips and pleading eyes.

“Leave him alone! Oh, don’t hurt him! You shall have more, only don’t hurt him!”

“‘I wouldn’t ‘a’ minded no singin’ out,’ my wife’ll say; ‘for no one wont hear ever such a singin’ out across Markham’s Medders; but I’d ‘a’ twisted it round, and round till the young lady kindly forked out them soverings and every other farden she had got about her, and giv’ ‘em me in a purty manner,’ she’ll say.”

Constance has fallen on her knees on the wet road, and 'Duke is still quivering in the man's grasp. One more twist of the tender arm, one more sharp cry, and soon all their little fortune lies glittering in the man's hand.

"Thank yer, my dears; I aint a beggar, but, as I said, I aint above acceptin' 'elp when it's forced upon me by a young lady an' gen'l'man like you. Good night."

Another moment, and he is setting off across the country in a halting run, alone.

Alone! No, no, John Hollis, not exactly alone. There is a little hand clutching at your sleeve, a faint child's voice ringing in your ears, a sweet upturned face, pale and beseeching, pictured on your guilty heart; and the hand, and the voice, and the face shall haunt you till your dying day. Never, never more, shall you be alone!

CHAPTER VII.

THE WAGGONER'S REST.

THE good people of Iversham boast of being the earliest risers on all the country side. Whether or no this boast be, in a general way, well grounded, it is certain that the dawn of one charming April morning found the village a very picture of life and bustle.

It was Saturday — market-day at the old town of Todness, some eight or nine miles from Iversham — and waggons, laden with the produce of those rich market-gardens, were lumbering in single file through the village, shaking its very foundations. The crackling of whips, the shouting of the waggoners, the neighing and stamping of heavy horses, the sawing and hammering in the carpenter's workshop, the nasal cries of the idiot shepherd-boy as the sheep and giddy lambs ran under the waggons, and in every direction but that in which he was trying to guide them, through the open gate of the meadow, where, standing in the bearded grass, which faintly gleamed with the earliest unexpanded buttercups, and nibbling the sweet, crisp hawthorn buds, the cows were being milked — all these noises united in making the place a perfect little Babel before Nature herself was quite awake. To all the broad valley, which lay like a garden around it sleep seemed to cling lovingly. Even the sunbeams lay, as in a dream, aslant the wet fields and lightly-clad trees, and went stealing at a lazy pace through the pale fairy network of the woods to kiss open the eyes of all the beauteous company keeping the festivities of the season down there. A breeze of morning stirred; and the sweet hyacinth began to shake her azure bells, and the anemones and primroses all in white and star colour to lead the dance up the bank; and young ferns in palest green swayed to the music;

and the hidden violet awoke with a sigh that made the breeze sink in sudden languor; and the thrush on the spray high above broke off at his sweetest note; and the happy carnival of the woods began.

There is another event, besides the fact of its being the market-day of Todness, which makes the village so early astir this morning; and this event is no less a one than the hoisting of a new sign-board at "The Waggoner's Rest." All the inhabitants, from the oldest to the baby in arms, have turned out to witness it, for it is to them a phenomenon as great as a total eclipse of the sun, or the appearance of a comet; and, indeed, they know that it would not come to pass now, had not good fortune brought hither a young man of artistic ability in the shape of the landlord's nephew.

"The Waggoner's Rest" is a little white house, with a pointed roof, surmounted by a showy gold weather-vane in the form of a greyhound, and with door and window shutters of dark green. Before it is a square of well-kept grass, fenced in by low white palings; and high above the little white gate is the iron suspender for the new sign-board. A strip of snowy stone extends across the grass from the gate to the porched door; on either side of which is a box-tree, cut and grown like a square table; and Mrs. Humphrey Standish, the landlord's wife, and the heaviest woman in the parish, boasts that each of these trees will bear her weight without "giving in." Through the low open

window, left of the door, that lady's buxom form may now be seen moving about over preparations for breakfast. It is a very busy morning for Mrs. Standish; Saturday morning always is busy, for the extra hands that come over from Todness on a Friday to help pack the waggons sleep and breakfast there. Through the window, on the right of the door, they are seen sitting round a snowy table at breakfast, discussing the scraps of news they pick up from the greasy *Todness Chronicle*, which somebody brought over yesterday with sandwiches wrapped in it. The door is open, and you can see right along the red-bricked passage to the garden at the back, where pretty Madgie Standish and the young painter of the sign-board are pulling radishes under the apple-trees. Old Humphrey Standish himself sits out on the grass-plot in front, with a slate on his knees, smoking his morning pipe, and bawls out every now and then some question to his wife, as he casts up his accounts.

In the road, a little to one side of "The Waggoner's Rest," stand two gigantic chesnut-trees, with seats round them. In the morning the children generally have the seats all to themselves to play on; in the afternoon the young girls take their needlework, and sit and gossip there; and of an evening they are left to the veterans of the village, who meet to discuss the affairs of the nation over a friendly pipe. But on this particular morning the chesnuts extend their shade

over a mixed and motley assemblage, in which three generations are represented. The seats are filled for the most part by old grandmothers and grandfathers, with their hands crossed over the heads of their walking-sticks; while grouped round them stand the mothers with their children; and several boys have climbed up into the trees above for the purpose of obtaining a better view of the important proceedings about to take place at "The Waggoner's Rest."

Old Humphrey glances at them from time to time with no very kindly eye.

"What's Kit about?" he inquires of his wife through the window. "How much longer is he going to keep a mob round the place? Confound him! I wish I'd never had the thing done!"

Mrs. Standish throws down the loaf and knife she has in her hand, and soon she is seen careering down the narrow red-bricked passage like a ship in full sail; and now, completely blocking up all view of the garden as she stands in the back doorway, shading her eyes with her hand, calls loudly—

"Kit! Kit, I say! Here's your uncle wantin' to know when you're a-comin' to put up your pictur'. Don't 'ee know that all the parish is at the door to see it? Come, lad, come! As for you, Madgie, you must have left your wits in your bed this morning, to be wastin' the blessed time like this, when here's your dough all a-risin' over the top of the pan, and me got

all the breakfastin' on my hands, as oughtened to have nothing to do at my time o' life. Let the radishes alone, do! and don't stand there hinderin' your cousin as is got *his* livin' to get, if you haven't yours, more's the pity. You may as well let the radishes alone, I tell you; they're too late now; Peter Bludget, as wanted 'em, has had his breakfast and gone his ways. This comes o' sending two to do a thing because one's in a hurry."

"But really, aunt," Kit is heard to protest as he approaches her, dangling a very small bunch of radishes, "we haven't been long—see, here's a bunch as big as Peter Bludget's head. I'm sure Madgie pulled most of 'em."

"Ah, Kit," says his aunt, taking them from him with a smile and a shake of the head, "you do encourage that gel in laziness and story-tellin' as if the Old Gentleman had promised you a profit on her if you get her over to him. There, go along, and take out your pictur', and I'll send Jemmy to fetch the ladder."

As Kit passed by her up the passage, Jemmy came out of the washhouse with his hair standing on end, and his face bearing signs of a very vigorous application of the jack-towel. He was a spare little man, with one leg shorter than the other, and was deaf and dumb, yet he had served as ostler and general drudge at the "Waggoner's Rest" ever since old Standish

came into the business. Jemmy was one of the most industrious, faithful, steady, punctual servants it was ever a landlord's good fortune to meet with, while he had his own way; but put him out of that, and his equal for dogged stupidity, obstinacy, and ill-temper was not to be found in any donkey that ever brayed. Old Standish himself seldom interfered with him; he saw he did his work well, and for lower wages than any one else would do it, and what more did he want from an ostler?

As a general rule, Jemmy is not accustomed to indulge in the gesticulations by which those with his infirmities are wont to express themselves. Indeed, Jemmy very rarely expresses himself at all. If his mistress forgets to give him his lunch, he never thinks of making signs for it, but stumps straightway to the pantry and helps himself; and the fear of his dirty footmarks across the kitchen keeps her memory in pretty good order concerning the matter. Moreover, it should be mentioned of Jemmy that he is never astonished at anything. The most surprising events may pass under his very eyes, yet he will take no more heed than if he had received private information at his birth of everything that is coming to pass during his lifetime.

Now, it has been one of Jemmy's ways, for no one can remember how long, to disappear into the back kitchen immediately after his breakfast; and then,

after some delay, to issue from it with his face and hair in the state described, and make for the stables, in which he has a comb hidden nobody knows where. No earthly power can induce him to do aught between the two processes of washing and combing; if anything be demanded of him on his way from the washhouse to the stables, he never, by any chance, understands.

When, therefore, on this busy and important morning, Mrs. Standish, with her usual disrespect to Jemmy's ways, lays hold of him by the breast of his coat, and indicates to him by expressive movements of her feet, suggestive of mounting a ladder, what it is she wants, Jemmy, with that peculiar facility of his of not understanding when he doesn't choose, limps doggedly on. His mistress looks after him unutterable things as he passes among the chickens in the stable-yard, which lies a little to the left of the garden.

Jemmy does not enter the great stables, but pauses before the door of a small compartment under the hay-loft. This is no longer used as a stable, on account of the wall at the back having given way and exposed it to the road; so it is now made a receptacle for empty sacks and old horsecloths, and smells agreeably of hay and old bass. Jemmy opens the door, takes one step forward, then limps back about two yards with a rapidity that astonishes his mistress.

“What's the matter with the old fool now?” she

says to Madgie, who is looking up the passage after Kit.

Jemmy stood where he was for more than a minute, scratching his head and staring before him into the sack room; then he turned and limped up the yard at a rate which struck wonder into all the chickens, and caused them to use their wings as well as their legs in getting out of his way. Stopping close to Mrs. Standish and Madgie, he jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the sack room some seven or eight times in a most mysterious and emphatic manner.

“Oh, goodness gracious, mother! What’s the matter with him?” cried Madgie, turning pale.

“Go and fetch your father and cousin directly,” said Mrs. Standish; and grasping Jemmy by the arm, she went sailing down the yard with him. Madgie soon came running back with her father and Kit, and she and her mother let the men go on in advance and take the first look.

“What is it, father? Oh! what is it?” said Madgie, going behind him.

Old Standish let his pipe fall and smash to atoms as he peeped in at the door.

“Why, here’s a couple of children dead on the bass!” he exclaimed.

A low, buzzing murmur of horror ran through the group, and they all came crowding round the door.

“God help us, father! what’s come on us now?” said Mrs. Standish, catching hold of her husband’s arm with both hands, and trembling all over. “Are you sure they’re dead?”

“Let’s get ’em to the kitchen fire, mother,” said Madgie, her pretty face more subdued than Kit had ever seen it before. “Make haste—let’s get them into the warm—perhaps they are only asleep or fainted.”

At this moment, Jemmy, who, instead of standing looking with the others, had been and fetched the wheelbarrow from round the corner, came up with it, and began to elbow his way between his master and mistress into the sack room, Madgie following him.

This move aroused old Standish from his temporary fit of abstraction. Seizing Jemmy by the collar of his coat, he dragged him back out of the shed, and, barring his daughter’s progress by half shutting the door, planted his back against it, and addressed them in the following manner:—

“Wait a bit—wait a bit—hold off all of you, and hear what I’ve got to say. Look you here—there’s two sides to the question about touching them at all. They may be dead, or they may not, but appeariantly they are dead. I’d be loth to leave ’em if they wasn’t; but there’s such a thing as a correnor’s inquest; and I’ve met more than one in my life who has found it turn out awk’ard for them touching dead bodies. Now, how do I know it mayn’t turn out awk’ard for me,

being found on my premises and all? No, no; I mean to be on the safe side. Leave 'em alone, and I'll go up to Todness for Justice Huffer, and here's Kit to stand witness to our not having laid a finger on 'em."

"I'll be hanged if there is, though!" cried Kit. "A pretty figure for a fellow to cut in a court of justice, standing witness to leaving two children in a place like this without knowing if they're dead or alive! Let's come by!"

Jerking open the crazy door with a force that nearly upset his uncle's balance, Kit stepped lightly over the sacks and rubbish, and kneeled down beside the two still and childish forms lying on the bass.

The sunshine gushing in at the wide-open door, and meeting that which found its way through the break in the wall, filled the little place with a sudden glare of light, revealing the husks of barley on the floor, and sending the spiders that were swinging leisurely in mid-air, rushing up invisible ladders, to take refuge in their black waving hammocks suspended from the roof. The only things in the sack room as yet undisturbed by the light were the children. The shadows of the long grass growing between the road and the shed waved fitfully over the light-coloured matting on which they lay; and as a background to the strange picture, there appeared, through the break in the wall, a glimpse of the valley, with its silvery, winding river,

and vivid spring foliage and pastures, all swimming over with April sunshine.

But Kit did not look towards this, for his whole attention was taken up by the strange travellers. He looked first at the long, straight figure of the one, with the black frock falling scantily about it, and the pale, careworn, but unconscious little face, with the short black hair lying in rings upon the forehead; and then at the fair small head of the other traveller, whose hair was being lifted and played with by the sunshine and breeze together, till it seemed like a maze of golden threads.

He looked at them both, and at their travel-soiled clothes, and a series of curious expressions flitted over his face. He did not say anything, but took hold of the little one's arm, and shook it gently. The child opened a pair of heavy blue eyes, and fixed them wonderingly on the young man's face.

"Christopher," he said, "is it you? I thought it was him twisting my arm round."

"Who, my little man?" inquired the landlord's nephew, kindly.

The boy did not answer, for he was looking at his sister, who lay as calm and unconscious of the glaring daylight and the voices as a graven image. Then, too, he saw the strange faces clustered round the door, and he murmured, with a cold fear creeping over him, and trembling the while from head to foot —

“What are they looking at, Christopher? Is she — is Conny —?”

His wild blue eyes supplied that last word of the question which his lips refused to utter. Christopher did not attempt to make any answer, but, sliding a not very steady arm under the girl, raised her up gently. His arm shook still more, and a murmur escaped Mrs. Standish and Madgie, as they saw her head droop back and her arms hanging stiffly down.

“Make way,” said Kit, hastily. “It’s old Chorley the bookseller’s daughter, at Aberford; the very girl I took out o’ the fire!” Then raising her in his arms like a babe, he carried her out into the air. ’Duke kept close to him, and the rest followed him up the stable-yard and into the kitchen.

When, on the night before, Constance had taken refuge, with her brother, in the strange resting-place where Jemmy found them, all fortitude, all hope, had left her heart. She let ’Duke cry himself to sleep without uttering one word of comfort, and, covering him with her shawl, turned away, and sat with her hands clasped in her lap, looking out of the broken wall at the two or three solitary lights twinkling far away down in the valley. She could not sleep, she could not pray, for one spectre was before her eyes that held them open, and one word alone came to her lips, and they repeated it over and over, each time with keener shame and misery — “Beggars! beggars!”

That was all she felt; they were beggars; and if little 'Duke had found the journey hard before, what would it be for him now? How would she find a resting-place for him at night?—how keep him from that terrible spectre which fear and hunger already brought near to her—*starvation*? And now, for the first time, her heart yearned, for his sake, towards the old home, and became heavy with doubt as to whether she had done well in taking him from its shelter. Suppose he should die of the journey, as the poor little linnet had! How would life be endurable to her ever after? She lifted her streaming face and clasped hands heavenwards, as if trying to reach again that invisible guiding Hand, which seemed to have let go of her when she most needed its aid. It was two hours before she fell asleep, for the sack room was not so quiet a resting-place as might be imagined. The water dripping incessantly from the roof, the horses stamping in the adjoining stable, the yard-dog jangling his heavy chain, and the rats galloping on the granary-floor overhead, kept her awake till the reflection of the stars faded in the river, a new light began to kindle it, and the dark valley shaped itself into fields and meadows. Then she slept, and dreamed she was again in her own little bed behind the picture-screen in the attic at home.

Her eyes had been closed scarcely an hour when she was awakened by the loud cackling of the hens

in the stable-yard. Faint with hunger and weariness, she raised herself on her elbow, and gazed around her in bewilderment, perfectly unconscious of where she was. Then, when her eyes fell upon Jemmy's extraordinary face in the doorway, a remembrance of all that had befallen her flashed across her mind, and, uttering a low moan, she fell back senseless on the matting.

When consciousness again returned, it seemed to the child that she was in another world. The first thing she became aware of, on opening her eyes, was a glare of yellow crocuses. She was lying on the great linen-press, under the open window of the kitchen; and it seemed to be the fresh breeze blowing on her face that was bringing her slowly and tranquilly back to life. She heard many voices laughing and talking without, and Constance, impelled by a childish curiosity, endeavoured to raise herself up to a sitting posture, that she might see what was going on. She did so with difficulty, and, leaning her head at the side of the window, looked over the yellow crocuses.

There was upon her that dreamy half-consciousness in which we can see or hear all things with mute acquiescence. She looked out upon the busy village picture, surrounded by country more beautiful than she had ever seen in the whole course of her dreary little life, and a vague wonder and delight lit up her

dark eyes. Was it a dream? 'Duke laughing and happy there amongst the children; these beautiful flowers, which seemed to shine upon her and comfort her like the sun; the fair spreading valley, of which she only caught delicious glimpses under and between the great waggon; the vivid blue of the April sky — yes, a dream surely it all must be. But presently, as she gazed up at the dazzling white clouds flitting like angels' robes over the blue, there appeared between her eyes and that sky a face the sight of which made the child's heart leap within her. Her eyes kindled, not with the slow recognition of a once-familiar face almost forgotten, but with the wonder and joy of meeting suddenly, in the flesh and the life, a face which, in the space of a moment, when she lay as in the valley of the shadow of death, when those flames leapt around her, and that fiery sword hung over her, had been photographed on her heart for ever. And long she sat there gazing up at him with that look which made Christopher smile, and praying that, if all were, indeed, a dream, she might never awake to find it so.

Alas, poor little Poplar! Even while she gazed, the sky darkened over with a fit of April passion, great rain-drops fell thick and fast, the wagoners ceased to admire the newly-mounted sign, cracked their whips, and the waggon lumbered on, leaving the valley, with its lustre all dimmed, open to the view. Women

threw their skirts over their heads, and rushed to their several homes with the young children; the boys dropped out of the branches, shaking down showers of bursting buds; the carpenter went on sawing his plank; Jemmy hobbled to the stables with a sack over his shoulders; and Humphrey Standish, with his wife, and Madgie, and Christopher holding 'Duke by the hand, entered the kitchen of the "Waggoner's Rest."

"Sit down, lass—sit down," said Mrs. Standish, laying her hand on her shoulder, and gently forcing her back on the edge of the press. "You don't look as if your legs 'ud bear you yet."

It was the first kind word, the first kind touch, the poor child had known for many a long day, and it brought the image of her mother floating before her eyes. She sat still a minute or more, looking down, and plaiting and unplaiting her thin, brown fingers, then, turning her face over her shoulder, burst into tears. 'Duke turned round and gazed at her in amazement; Christopher looked troubled, and the three judges by the linen-press exchanged meaning glances. To them it was evident her tears were a silent confession of some wrong-doing having brought her and her little brother into this strange position.

"Come now, missy, don't cry," said Mrs. Standish, trying to speak severely, in order to prevent her husband doing so—"don't cry, but speak out and tell us how you come to be strayin' away from your home

like this. Don't you think it's a very dreadful thing? and your poor little brother so delicate too, bless him! Come, tell us all about it—where you come from, and where you *was* going."

But while Constance stood silent, wondering what she could say, Kit seemed to be urging something on Humphrey, apart, in an undertone too low for Constance to catch a word.

At last the innkeeper rose, and laying his pipe on the mantelpiece, and putting his foot on his chair to tie his shoe, said, with his back towards them—

"Well, I don't know as I mind that—I don't know as I mind doing as Kit says—let 'em be here then till to-morrow, when Kit's father and mother's coming to dinner, and then we'll talk over what's to come of 'em. As Kit says he's seen 'em with respectable people, I don't know as I mind 'em stayin' till then—no, I don't know as I do."

Constance was about to thank him, but he had passed out of the room before she had thought of a word to say.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WORLD WITHIN THE WORLD, DISCOVERED BY THE "LITTLE POPLAR."

IT was drawing nigh to the early tea-hour at "The Waggoner's Rest." Constance sat alone in the kitchen,

at the little side-table containing Madgie's Bible and workbox, with a heap of stockings before her. All the noise and bustle of the market-day was over. Humphrey Standish and his wife dozed by the fire in the best parlour, undisturbed by Jemmy's splashing and scrubbing in the stable-yard, or the clink clink of the little maid's pattens on the bricks of the passage and washhouse. Madgie, with 'Duke by her side, sat at needlework under the chestnuts, and Christopher was leaning over the white palings, chatting and laughing with her and her companion. Now and then those busy brown fingers in the kitchen would pause over their work, and those large, earnest eyes be lifted from the stocking and allowed to rest one moment on his face; often they would be turned to their work again full of tears, for the child's heart was very sorrowful when she felt that Christopher would never know that the life he had saved was being devoted to a good purpose, but must always think she had run away with some secret disgrace upon her, as was now probably being hinted in Aberford. Yes, she was very sorrowful when she thought of this, and turned over in her mind all manner of things to say to him; but she could perceive no way to convince him save by revealing her secret, and, rather than do that, she would endure the scorn of Christopher and all the world. So she tried to forget it for a time, and bent resolutely over old Humphrey's grey stocking. But

the sound of the girls' happy voices, laughing and chattering in the sunshine, made her thoughts wander, and presently she looked up again. Christopher had left the gate, and she heard his step coming up the passage. Her hand shook so that she could scarcely guide her needle, for she felt that if he found her alone, he would question her about the object of her journey, and how should she answer him?

In another minute she heard him crossing the kitchen with his shaggy dog, Merrylegs. 'Duke followed with a ship which Kit had rudely fashioned for him, and wanted to know when he would take him down to the river to sail it.

"Oh, we'll see about that after tea," Christopher said, smiling at the air of intense relief which Constance could not conceal at the interruption.

"And, Conny, you must come too," said 'Duke, patronisingly. "May my sister come with us, Christopher?"

"Certainly."

"And Merrylegs?"

"Well, yes, Merrylegs can come, if your sister has no objection." This was said a little mischievously, for the Poplar and Merrylegs had been by no means good friends at Aberford, where he flew at her heels almost every time she went out.

"I'll answer for his being on his best behaviour. I'm going up to Hollington now, but will meet you

at the water-side when you've done your teas. Good-bye for the present."

"Good-bye, Christopher," said the child; "we will be sure to be there"—and her face flushed and lighted up with a ray of genuine pleasure as she once more bent over her work—and oh, how the little brown fingers flew! A vision floated before her eyes—a vision of the shining river, with its pale green banks, where she was going to walk with Christopher, in the still evening, and taste her first and last of liberty, and rest, and peace, before work, real hard work, must begin. Yes, the fingers flew, and so fast, and so deftly, that, when Madgie came in with the milk for tea, the grey stockings were finished, and the little seamstress was ready to assist in preparing that comfortable meal.

"Where's Kit?" inquired the landlord, as he sat down at the table and saw his nephew's place empty.

"Oh, gone to look at Mister Dale's new threshing-machine; there's something wrong with it, and they've sent for him," answered his wife.

"I wish folks 'ud leave him to keep to his own trade, and not go making him think he can understand everything. What does he know about engineerin'?"

Constance thought tea would never be over. She saw, through the back window, the shadows creeping higher and higher up the stable wall, and, at the front, she saw the crocuses closing, and feared that all the

brightness and sparkle must die out of the valley before they reached the river-side.

“Where are *you* going, young sir?” inquired the landlord, as 'Duke, when the meal was over, got down from his chair, and took his ship in his arms.

“He is going to try his ship in the river, please,” Constance answered for him, quite at a loss how to ask leave for herself.

“Then get on your bonnet, lass, and go with him,” said Mrs. Standish, kindly. “It’s pleasant down there by the water-side; go—it’ll do you good.”

So they went out together joyfully, and up the quiet village street, passing the chestnuts, where the old men sat, and the prim church, and the school, and then over the stile, and through the hushed market-gardens and fields that went slanting down to the river. They came upon it suddenly at last, for, as they had got low in the valley, the thickening trees had hidden it from their view; but now, through a break in the foliage, they came upon it, and stood on its brink, following with thoughtful eyes the shining little waves as they rolled along.

Just here the river seemed to have a separate world of its own, shut in from the outer world by ranks of trees towering grandly one above another, till the chestnuts showed their pale, crimped leaves against the sky. Though, as Constance had feared, the sunshine had died away from the spring foliage and the

water she did not miss it, for this river-world possessed a faint, mysterious lustre of its own. It seemed to Constance that every tree—from the limes and chestnuts high above, to the willows and young aspens fringing the banks—gave forth a light of its own, each tender and faint, but each different. The white buds on the blackthorn glimmered like strings of pearls, and the tufts of primroses shone clear and luminous on the river's brink, like a reflection of the coming stars; the water itself kept breaking into little circles of silver light, as the trout leaped in it, snatching at the gnats buzzing and whirling above. And even as the light of day, so also the sounds of day, were not missed, for the river sang as it flowed—sang in its strong, calm voice, reminding one of a happy life flowing on and on, in faith and strength, to the sea of eternity. And Constance sat down on the stone beside it, and listened to it, and drew comfort and peace from its song.

She had not sat there many minutes, listening to the river, and watching 'Duke flitting hither and thither along the bank, before her ear caught another sound, and she smiled without taking her eyes from the grey water. It was Christopher's whistle—that same clear, brilliant whistle she had often and often listened to as she sat at her little bedroom window in the early summer mornings at Aberford. She smiled to herself now as she remembered how she used

to wonder who it was that whistled with such wonderful clearness and accuracy, and how she mingled this whistle with the wild old romances she used to take, one by one, from her father's shop, and read and dream over in her dreary attic.

“Hullo!” shouted Christopher, leaping down the bank, with Merrylegs after him. “What, here first?”

She looked up, and made room for him on the stone; and, being tired, Christopher sat down, and Merrylegs went tearing off to where he saw 'Duke, far away along the bank, looking like a speck on the water's edge. Christopher took up the ship from where it rested against Constance's feet, and, while examining it and tightening the sails, broke out again with a whistle, not sharp nor brilliant now, but modulated to the low, soft, river music, and the sighing of the trees as the wind made their crisp young leaves brush together. Truly there must be music in Christopher's soul, Constance thought (though she could not put her thoughts into words), as she gazed up in his face with childish wonder and awe, that he was thus able to make his whistle blend so perfectly with the trees and the river, that it no more destroyed the harmony than did the waving of the rushes, or the breathing of the blue hyacinths.

“Christopher,” she said, under her breath, and without moving her wondering eyes from his face,—

“Christopher, I wish you would sing the same thing that you are whistling. Are there words to it?”

Christopher looked at her in surprise.

“What was I whistling?” he asked.

“I don’t know. It was a soft, sad tune, like the sound of the water.”

“Was it this?”

And, setting down the ship and leaning his head on his hand, he hummed the refrain of a plaintive old love-song that Constance had often heard her mother sing over her work long years ago, and she looked up in tears, and nodded for him to go on, though it was not the air he had been whistling; and then Christopher, smiling at her earnestness, began the first line of the song, and sang it through, in a voice so full, and sweet, and exquisitely modulated, that the “Little Poplar” was too much stirred to sit still. She rose up on the stone, and stood listening, with her brown hands clasped, and eyes brimming over with tears, while the sound flowed round her; and it did not seem to be Christopher alone who sang, but the river and the reeds along its brink. The sighing willows and rustling hawthorns, taking their keynote from his voice, seemed to swell the sound till it filled all the little river-world, and rose up—up—beyond the limes—beyond the highest chestnuts, and out into the blue space where the evening star shone all alone in its tender beauty. Yes, the “Little Pop-

lar" wept, for her heart struggled and rebelled under its heavy weight of care, and yearned with a strong and passionate yearning to be released. "Why did you tell me life was all dark and bitter?" it cried to her. "Is there such beauty and joy in it as this I feel go by me, and must I be shut out from it for ever and ever?" At that instant, as she stood there, she might, indeed, have been the poplar, and Christopher's voice might have been the south wind whispering round it, laden with the sweet odour of distant hay-fields and bruised clover, and making it moan and lash the sky, and turn this way and that, in wild longing, as it hears of all the wondrous wealth of summer beauty lying beyond its desolate wold.

Christopher finished his song; the last notes died away down the river, and lingered quiveringly among the rushes, as on the strings of a harp; yet the dark, lithe figure on the stone stood motionless. He had watched it all the while he sang, and thought how eerie and elf-like it looked, as the wind blew its scant robe and short, jetty hair all one way, showing the sharp outline of its face and form. As he looked at her now, without knowing whether he had pleased or pained, she met his eye, and, crouching down upon the stone, hid her face in her hands, and he could hear her low, half-stifled sobbing. Christopher was much perplexed; never having had a sister of his own, he understood nothing of the nature of little girls,

and generally disliked and avoided them, Madgie alone excepted; but then she was two years older than himself, and of a calm lazy temper that never troubled any one. Yet, though they annoyed and perplexed him, these outbursts of the "Little Poplar" seemed to tell of an earnest, passionate nature that was not without its charm to him, strange and new as it was. He looked at the young form that, on the night of the fire, he had borne in his arms as a dead thing — looked at it bowed down beside him. A wish, too strong to spring merely from curiosity, possessed him to fathom the mystery that enshrouded it. He hardly knew the sound of his own voice as he touched her on the shoulder, and said —

"What is the matter? Why don't you tell me?"

Constance did not move, but the strange, sweet kindness of Christopher's voice went straight to her heart and a great lull came over her — such a lull as fell upon the troubled waters when One said unto them, "Peace, be still." Would she hear that voice again — just the same, low and somewhat unsteady, but oh, so sweet, so very sweet, for its kindness? She sat still, waiting, in trembling, happy silence.

"Come, let me help you, if I can. You could trust me, couldn't you?"

She raised her face, just as it was, wet with tears, and radiant in its happiness, and looked into his.

“Christopher!” she said, “do you remember that dreadful, dreadful night?”

“Look!” said Christopher, smiling, and holding out his hand.

She bent over it, and he saw her lips turn white and quiver as she looked at the half-healed burn.

“For me,” she murmured — “for me. Oh, Christopher!”

“Well,” said Christopher, laughing, “I don’t suppose it would have pained the less, if it had been for anybody else. But what about that night, then?”

“You asked me Christopher, if I could trust you, and I was going to tell you that, since that night, I have felt as if I could trust you before any one in the world, because you were the only one in the world who thought me worth risking life for.”

“Well, then,” returned Christopher, “if you really feel so, Pop — Constance, I mean — tell me what all this is about.”

“All I can tell you, Christopher,” she answered with mournful firmness, “is this: I have him” — and she pointed to 'Duke, who was guiding his ship, which he had taken away while Christopher was singing, along the edge of the river — “I have him to work for and bring up all by myself. We have no home, no father — yes, yes, I know what you mean — he lives, but I tell you we haven’t any father — no Christopher, we are alone in the world.”

“Then, of course,” said Christopher, “if that’s all I’m to know, it’s impossible for me to help you, with my uncle.”

Those large, liquid eyes, gazing down at the river, grew so full of anguish and despair, that he half repented of the tone in which this was said.

“Ah, Christopher, Christopher, how I wish, oh, how I wish, there’d never been a lie told since the world began—so that you wouldn’t think, so that you wouldn’t dream, of disbelieving me when I tell you that, as sure as there is a river at our feet, as sure as there is a God in heaven, Christopher, it is not anything I have done that has brought us to this. If it were, Christopher, and if it were for myself that I have left home and him, I couldn’t have borne all that I have—I must have gone back long before. I couldn’t feel this great thankfulness to you, Christopher, for saving me that night, but should hate you for not having left me to die.”

It was not easy to sit there and listen to that childish voice, and doubt the truth of what it uttered with such passionate vehemence; nor to look into that childish face without perceiving that it was conscious truth ennobled it.

“Constance Chorley,” said Christopher, forgetting for the moment she was a child, “I do believe you. I promise I will help you in whatever I can, without wanting to know more.”

“You do?—you will?” she said, and such a smile illumined the sallow little face! He had seen that smile twice before—once when she lay under the fiery beam, and once when she looked at him from the window of “The Waggoner’s Rest.” He had thought then it must have been the glare of the yellow crocuses that gave it its strange charm; but now he could see it was the heart’s own sunshine breaking through the clouds.

“Then you are satisfied now?” he said, smiling also. He half expected another outburst of gratitude, but she merely nodded as she looked down the river, and answered, in a low, quivering tone—

“Yes, Christopher, thank you—quite—quite satisfied.”

’Duke shouted and sang to his little fairy ship. The daylight fled, and the pale moonbeams stole in through the branches, and each leaf and flower gave forth a lustre more soft and bright than ever.

It was strangely out of keeping with Christopher’s restless nature to spend two whole hours in idleness, and he could not understand how they had passed so quickly, nor could he understand the dreamy, exquisite pleasure which stole over him with the voice of the river and the faint moonlight. Was it thoughts of Madgie? Perhaps it was. Constance wondered—he wondered himself—if he had been fancying that quiet little companion at his side, across whose clear

brow and cheek flickered shadows of the overhanging leaves, to be his cousin Madgie. He was half inclined to believe he had.

And yet, when in his dreams that night, and long after, the sweet April evening and the shining river came before him, it was not that cabbage-rose face of Madgie's, with its lips reminding one of the cherry season, and roving blue eyes, but a little face as pure and fragile as the hawthorn-blossom that he looked for in his vision—a little face with a thin, pensive mouth, and dark eyes swimming in happy, holy light.

CHAPTER IX.

A FAMILY CONSULTATION DINNER.

EVER since the Vallons and the Standishes had been allied by marriage, the custom was, when any important family business had to be settled, to hold a consultation-dinner at "The Waggoner's Rest." Kit remembered several of these dinners—indeed, more than one had been holden on his account; but not a single instance could he recollect when he had not felt considerably greater interest in pondering and conjecturing what lay beneath the bright, but battered, old dish-covers, than in listening to the discussion carried on by his elders. Now however, when, on this first Sunday in the eighteenth April of his

existence, his relatives were gathered together to decide by which of the numerous handicrafts he practised he should earn his bread through life, he felt, as he sat before his untouched dinner, that peculiar strain at his waistcoat-buttons which in former times he never knew until after the third course of pudding. In vain he tried, by chatting lightly with Madgie, to keep up an appearance of unconcern; his hands shook as he passed the loaded plates to their various destinations, and all he said wanted point. His aunt and uncle saw and attributed his unusual behaviour to simple excitement, but his mother's soft brown eyes were fixed upon his face with a look that showed sympathy with a much deeper feeling she knew to be astir in Kit's heart just now. Up to this day Kit's life had been one bright advance. *He* knew no regretful yearnings after the past. If he looked back at all, it was to view with pleasure the progress he had made, for nothing did it contain brighter than what he saw in the future. If yesterday took a hope away, to-day brought a more radiant one to lead him on. But he knew that a time had come when this bright advance must stop — when his airy dreams must be confined within the narrow limits of the workshop — when the line of social distinction, which his eyes as yet had scorned to see, should be made for ever impassable — and, as he looked into the gleaming cover where passed before his eyes a series of consultation-

dinners, marking all the important stages of the "set grey life" he was about to enter upon, far in the future he saw himself sitting at the end of the table — where his father sat — deciding the fate of *his* son. And would it go on so for ever? he asked himself. Were his sons, for generation after generation, to sit at that table and make their choice, simply between the mallet and the spade, the shop and the plough? Yes, Kit asked himself these questions, and a spirit of rebellion, against he knew not what, swelled his heart.

During these consultation-dinners it was customary to allow the company to take off the edge of their appetites before commencing business. Then, ere the second tending of meat, Grandfather Vallon arose and drew attention, by an appropriate speech, to the occasion which had brought them together.

All manner of noises filled Kit's ears, and a film came across his eyes as he saw the tall, lanky figure of his grandfather rise and stick its yellow fists on the table, and bend over it, and, one by one, each knife and fork ceased to clatter, and was laid in brief repose across the plate. Humphrey Standish covered over the great round of beef that was before him, and leaned forward with his arms on the table. Mrs. Standish laid a finger on her cheek, and assumed an air of grave responsibility. Mrs. Vallon, Kit's mother, had enough to do to keep the baby from crawling

right across the table to its grandfather, who, it fancied, invited its approach.

“Humphrey Standish,” began old Vallon, looking, not at the landlord, but at his son Jack, who now and then encouraged him in his speech with nods and — “Right, right — just so, just so” — “Humphrey Standish, according to the old, original rule —”

“Yes, yes — just so,” said Uncle Vallon, with an approving nod.

“My family,” proceeded old Vallon, “is come over for the purpose of consulting your family on an event, or a piece of business —”

There he paused, and looked doubtfully at Jack.

“Yes, yes — it doesn’t matter which; go on — event, or piece of business.”

“Likely to prove of great importance to both families.”

“Ay, that’s very true,” said Mrs. Standish, emphatically, wiping her eyes as she looked at Madgie and Christopher. “Go on, grandfather.”

“And this event is,” old Vallon proceeded, “the deciding on some respectable trade for my dear grandson, Christopher, by which he may earn his bread like an honest man, as his father, and grandfather, and great-grandfather did before him. There, Jack! I think that’s what you wanted me to put before Humphrey Standish, isn’t it?”

And grandfather sat down and wiped his forehead.

“Yes,” said Uncle Vallon; “I think grandfather’s put it all before you very neat; and now, Standish and Margaret, what say you?”

“I say this,” answered Mrs. Standish, folding her arms, and gazing admiringly at Kit, “that there never was, nor never will be, a lad so hard to choose a trade for as him; and why? because he’s got every trade going at his fingers’ ends. I’m sure, where he picked ’em all up beats me to this day. One time I see him mendin’ Madgie’s little table, and I says to Humphrey, ‘Oh, there’s no doubt about it, Kit’s heart and soul a joiner!’ but turn my back a minute, and there’s the old clock on the stairs, as stopped a week before he was born, a-tickin’ as if there had been nothing the matter with it! But Lor’! it’s the same with everything; and, as I say, how did he come by it all? How came he to understand everything like this, from the Latin gibberish in his prize grammar to the workings of a clock’s inside? He goes about things in such a knowing, easy way, and looks at ’em as much as to say, ‘I understand all about you—don’t have any nonsense with me!’—and, if you’ll believe me, I can’t help fancying, sometimes, when I’m expecting of him down, that the clocks keep better time, and the doors stop creaking, as if they was afraid of him.”

“Ay, ay—that’s all very well,” said the landlord; “but he won’t get a honest living by being a Jack-of-all-trades—that’s quite certain.”

“Well, and what’s your advice, Humphrey?” asked Uncle Vallon.

“Why, that he sticks to his father’s business, and knocks all the other nonsense out of him.”

All the company looked at Kit and Kit’s father, to see what they thought of this advice. The son remained immovable, with his eyes dull and fixed—not a shadow of a smile had his aunt’s rhapsody brought forth on his face. The father leaned his elbow on the table, and his bright black eyes searchingly and seriously gazed into the uncertain grey ones of the landlord.

“How do you mean, Humphrey Standish?” said he, in a tone of mild reproof. “Why do you call the talents it has pleased God to give my boy nonsense?”

“Because they seem as if they’d keep him from settling to one honest trade,” growled the landlord.

“Stay! I think, Humphrey, you are wrong there,” said Uncle Vallon, a little excitedly.

“Perhaps you have made up your mind,” said the landlord, shortly; “because, if you have, you had better tell us at once, and not go asking advice just to puff it away.”

“Yes, Humphrey Standish,” Kit’s father answered, quietly but firmly—“I have made up my mind.”

Jack Vallon made up his mind on such an important affair as this, and before a consultation-dinner had been held upon it! His father, sister, and brother-in-

law—nay, even his own wife and Kit—were overwhelmed with amazement, and fell to wondering whatever would come next.

“And pray what might your mind be?” inquired the landlord, as soon as his astonishment found voice; and every eye, save Kit’s, was turned upon Uncle Vallon.

The wheelwright hemmed and coughed as if he had got something in his throat he couldn’t swallow; and the upper halves of his cheeks, which were not concealed in his stiff stand-up collar, became, by turns, red and pale. Kit, in the midst of his anxiety, was aware that Madgie was laughing in her sleeve at his father’s ridiculous appearance just now, with his hands twitching one another, and the long daffodil all a-tremble in his button-hole. It was the last time in his life Kit was ashamed of his father. Suddenly, as they all looked at him, as at one whose brain had given way, Uncle Vallon threw off his nervous, hesitating manner, and leaning forward, with his hands clasped on the table, and turning his eyes, brimful of modest pride and tenderness, upon his son, said, in a voice loud and distinct, but trembling with emotion—

“Yes, I have decided on what I will make of Christopher: not a carpenter, though I humbly believe he wouldn’t find his equal, if I did; nor yet a wheelwright, though he could shame his father. He knows much; but, to be that which I would make him, he

must know much more—must labour and strive harder than he has ever done yet. It's no trade I am going to put him to—it's a profession."

"A profession!" was echoed on all sides.

"Yes I am to put him in a position to fight his way amongst the best of 'em. I've got the money to do it—money earned by the sweat of my brow on purpose for him, when I might have been taking my rest—and I will do it! Yes, Humphrey Standish with God's blessing, I will make my son an engineer and a gentleman!"

Christopher sat still, looking down into his plate, all unconscious of the amazement, the panic, which followed his father's speech; his very soul seemed to reel with the giddiness of a bird burst from its long imprisonment into boundless space.

The landlord rose to his feet, trembling with some unaccountable emotion:—

"Jack Vallon, you're a fool!" he said, hoarsely.

His brother-in-law regarded him in pained, stern surprise.

"Humphrey, what is the matter with you?"

"Matter, Jack Vallon! I take it to heart, this yer. I thought better on you, Jack—I thought better things on you. Make him a gentleman! Are you so fond o' the tribe as you'd make more on 'em to suck the poor? Is that your speret, Jack?—is that your grandfather's speret?"

“Listen, Humphrey!” said Jack. “I have my reasons for doing this thing.”

“I don’t want to hear ’em!” cried the landlord, almost passionately. “I put this to you, what’ll the people as he’s to go among say to his family? Ah, I put that to you:—‘What’s your father?’ ‘A wheelwright.’ ‘And what was your grandfather?’ ‘A carpenter.’ ‘And your great-grandfather?’ ‘A tramping tinker.’ Fine ancestors for a gentleman, eh, Kit? Tush! Jack, I tell you they’ll none of him; he’ll be trod unter their feet like dirt. I thought you’d ’a’ had more pride for your family.”

“I am sorry to say it, Humphrey Standish,” Jack returned, shaking his head mournfully; “but, to tell the truth, leaving out o’ the question what Kit may do, I haven’t much cause to be proud o’ my family. They’ve mostly been of that set o’ men who have ‘My son sha’n’t be better than me’ for their motto, and act upon it age after age—a set that wouldn’t thank you for bettering of them. No, Humphrey, I’ve no call to be proud of my ancestors, but my grandsons sha’n’t say that. We’ll get out o’ this somehow, or, if not, they shall know that Jack Vallon, the wheelwright, made a hard push for it.”

“And pray,” said Humphrey, with a scarcely-concealed sneer, “how is this fine scheme to be managed?”

“Why, Gwynne and Hardell, the great agricultural

machine-makers, have seen Kit two or three times, and taken a fancy to him, and I have agreed to pay them a pretty stiff premium."

"Ay, indeed; and how much, now?"

"Why," said Uncle Vallon, after a moment's hesitation, as if to pluck up courage, "I know I have done well; for I am to pay only half of what their last pupil paid them." Still he did not mention the sum, but wiped his warm face, and seemed to forget the question had been put.

"But the figure, Jack?" remorselessly continued Humphrey.

"Well, it's a stiffish sum, as I said. No less than £ 200 — but there are many advantages."

Humphrey gave a prolonged whistle, and Mrs. Standish coughed rather gravely, and altogether there was an uncomfortable idea pervading the place that Uncle Vallon had done a wild thing. But the latter sat quiet, and ceased speaking.

With his hands clasped between his knees, looking down upon the floor, Christopher all this while had never once raised his eyes. Whether he was abashed by his father's confidence, or whether he felt an unworkmanlike sensation of something pressing at his lids, I cannot say, but now he raised them, and turned them on his father's face — a plain, sallow, pock-marked face it was, in an ordinary way, but to Kit, just now, it was a countenance too truly noble to

gaze on unmoved. Presently the silence was broken by a heavy kitchen chair being pushed back from the table, and then Kit stood at his father's side. He did not speak a word, nor did his father. Their hard hands touched for a second, and they looked into each other's eyes one long questioning and answering glance. That was all. Kit returned to his place. Yes, he returned to his place, but his soul was down at Uncle Vallon's feet, and Uncle Vallon was bending over it with the blessing that he never breathed in words.

"So this is Jack Vallon, is it?" thought Humphrey to himself, at the dinner, as he put the ale-glass to his lips and set it down again without drinking. Nay, Humphrey Standish, in vain you hold your glass up to the light—your good old ale is as fine and clear as ever: the evil taste is in your own mouth.

They were all silent, when Humphrey made them start by suddenly turning and resting his glass on his knee, and pointing towards the children with his pipe, while saying to his nephew—

"You'll have the kindness, Kit you and your father, to take that there business on your own hands, seein' as I've got that on mine as keeps 'em pretty full. You may be able to attend to such things—you and him may be, I dare say; and it's no doubt very creditable on you; but as for me, *I* find it as much, or as I may say, *more* than I can do to manage them

as belongs to me, and keep 'em from makin' fools of 'emselves, without turnin' charity lawyer for every tramp as comes trespassing on my premises. As to putting my hands in my pocket, I've no objection to that in a reasonable way, though I aint got two hundred laid by unbeknown to my family, as some folks has. My pocket and my wittles is at your service, if so be they're wanted; but responsibility aint, and there's an end on't."

As he ceased, there was a silence which seemed perfectly terrible to poor Constance. She had a feeling that she ought to get up and say something about her willingness to go away with her brother; but her tongue seemed to have lost all power of speech, and for the moment the attack, in its very suddenness and unexpectedness, quite overwhelmed her.

Uncle Vallon, having waited to see if any one else would speak before him, at last said—

"Will you tell me, my dear, where you are going, and what you want to do? Don't be afraid to speak out."

"We want, please, sir, to get to my aunt, who lives at Westcliff."

"And haven't you money enough to get there in the quickest way—by the coaches?"

"A man took it all from us, else we had enough, by walking part of the way."

"But, my dear hadn't you better write to your aunt,

and tell her where you are, before you undertake so long a journey?"

"Please to remember, Jack Vallon, what I said a bit ago," interrupted Humphrey Standish. "I don't mean to do an unkind thing, but I say, and I'll stand to it, no responsibilities for me."

"You mean, Humphrey, I suppose, you don't wish them to stay here any longer — not even while they wait for the aunt's answer?"

"*Wish* it! Humph! they shan't and that's what I've got to say, Jack. No offence to them — or you."

Uncle Vallon seemed about to speak hurriedly in reply, then paused and dropped his head — a habit of his when meditating. A moment after he heard his wife say —

"Why can't we take them home with us for a bit? Margaret tells me she's a good, useful girl. I want help, and we could send the boy to school — I mean, till the letter comes."

Uncle Vallon's face brightened all over, but there was something in his subdued manner of speaking that implied he had been looking for such a result, and that, now it was obtained, the less fuss he made about the mode, the better it would be.

"Very well, children; then get ready as soon as you like for Peeler's Pond, for the chaise won't hold us all, and so we must send you on first. You take them, Kit, and then give the horse as long a rest as you can before coming to fetch us in the evening."

CHAPTER X.

PEELER'S POND.

PEELER'S POND must, to judge from its appearance, have become a village unintentionally. The large, old-fashioned farm cottage, which had first impregnated the sweet wood air with its smoke, had been joined by one quiet homestead and another until there was, at the woody foot of the hill, a very fair cluster of houses—a cluster quite considerable enough to be called a village, only that they had fitted and arranged themselves in so comfortable and picturesque a manner, and with so little destruction to the fine old trees of Peeler's Pond, that, at first sight, they rather gave one the impression of being a pic-nic party down in the woods, than of forming a real and stable little hamlet likely to hold its ground and increase with time.

The pond itself, from which the place took its name, and which was situated in the centre of the village, was a commonplace piece of water enough, fenced round with white paling, apparently for the safety of the donkeys on the green rather than of the children, for whom there was plenty of room to run under. It may, no doubt, have been a more picturesque pond once upon a time. What common village pond now used for cooling horses' legs in, or receiving all vagrant dogs, very young kittens, or very

old cats, and being, besides, the place of fashionable resort for all the ducks and geese of the neighbourhood—what village pond, though turned to these uses, does not seem, in the lull of a spring noon, or in the twilight of a summer's morning, to tell, like man's records, of a vanished paradise; to be stirred by a breath of memory so plaintive that its stunted willow and its few remaining rushes bow with one accord before it, as though yearning after that dim morning of creation ere a leaf had fallen or a flower decayed?—a time when, framed with its blue forget-me-nots, it was a fitting mirror to reflect heaven's face, in all its thousand and ever-beautiful changes—when water-lilies may have floated on its clear bosom; when that same bare, stunted willow, which now the common little sparrows scorn to build their nests in, was a wilderness of silvery leaves, uttering a music like that which wooed poor sick Ophelia to her doom.

It will be remembered that it was a Sunday evening on which Christopher, the good wheelwright's son, led our little adventurers to this his native village. As they issued from the narrow lane the sunset colours were fading slowly in the murky waters of the pond, round which a tribe of yellow, downy goslings were taking their last sail ere retiring for the night. Already several ducks were waddling slowly up the green towards their homes, and had stopped at different intervals on the slope, some to admire the evol-

utions of the little goslings in the water, others to scan the chaise and its occupants with a lazy curiosity, and—as 'Duke could not help thinking, as he saw them occasionally glance askance at one another with a slight rise of the wings, very much resembling that movement we call shrugging the shoulders—to pass satirical remarks thereon, as it stopped before a door in a high wooden fence, tarred black, with light tree-tops appearing above it.

Christopher took a large key from his pocket and proceeded to unlock the freshly-tarred door.

A very fresh and pleasant picture it opened upon, that clumsy black door—a little yard, irregularly paved with round and oval stones, which shone as snow-white this April weather as the blossoms that the old blackthorn by the pump showered down upon them. On the right was the back of Uncle Vallon's workshop, a low-roofed, ungainly building, opening towards the road which Christopher had left when he turned into the narrow lane. On the other side of the door were a stable and a gigantic old pump, with a red watering-can and some garden tools grouped round it. Directly opposite the door, and at the end of a long garden, stood the wheelwright's cottage. It was not an ideal cottage, boasted of no ancient thatched roof, or latticed windows, or rural porch; on the contrary, take it by itself, it was as unsightly as a modern cottage could well be, for the wheelwright, though an excellent man at

heart, was not in any way remarkable for good taste. The garden, also, was not laid out after the style of gardens most admired. It never, for instance, boasted the elegant and intricate archwork of scarlet runners that the garden of "The Waggoner's Rest" did, where Christopher and Madgie used to play at hide-and-seek every Sunday of their lives, till Madgie went into long dresses, and preferred sitting in the parlour and eating oranges to tearing her skirts with the pea-sticks. No — Uncle Vallon's was not such a garden as his brother-in-law's at Iversham, but all that two or three hours a day of hard, loving labour, without much taste or skill, could do for it, he did. Yet, though we all know love is a great gardener, and frequently achieves wonderful things entirely unhelped by skill, he will at times plant his roses and cabbages together indiscriminately, and allow his most beautiful lilies to be choked by common clambering peas—and so it was in Uncle Vallon's case. The path leading straight from the yard to the house-door was bordered with violets, parsley, double daisies—white and red, thyme, pansies, horseradish, and other useful, low-growing vegetables. And year by year, on each side of this path, roses, hollyhocks, beans, dahlias, lettuces, tiger-lilies, and sunflowers, flourished together in sweet companionship. An elder-tree and a lithe laburnum, arching where the path began, formed a fitting frame for this rude garden picture. Rude, indeed,

and yet dearly cherished in more hearts than one. Little children, out with their nurses in the hot weather, loved it—and would pause on the dusty road to peep at it through the cracks in the black door. Uncle Vallon flattered himself it was the excellent taste displayed in the arrangement of form and colour that these little ones paused to admire; and he beamed upon them as he slaked their thirst with a drink of the delicious pump-water, lifting the red can so gently for fear of hurting the tiny rose lips with its sharp spout. He did not know, nor did they, that there was a spirit pervading his garden that drew them thither as if by magic; that made them so love the gleam of the white stones, the dripping of the pump, and the sweet smell of the flowers, that in years to come they would remember the glimpses through that door as tenderly and wonderingly as if they had been glimpses of paradise; and those rose lips, withered by their long and bitter draught of life, would thirst in vain for a nectar as delicious as the water from that old red can. What spirit was it, then? What but the sweet spirit of loving-kindness? Our little Poplar felt it as she crossed the yard with Christopher, and passed under the rustic arch into the garden; it entered her heart with the soft beauty and stillness of the Sabbath evening, and beckoned her across the threshold of the cottage-door, whispering—“Here, for awhile, rest.”

Simple and insignificant as the events of the Sunday may have appeared to the reader, they tended, nevertheless, to change greatly the aspect of affairs in the wheelwright's quiet household. The only subject discussed at breakfast next morning was that which naturally lay nearest the father's and mother's heart, namely, Christopher.

"Of course, Eppie," said the wheelwright, in a tone of resignation, "when he's gone to live at the works at Todness, we mustn't expect to have him home here oftener than once in a week; he *might* come over of evenings once in a way; but if he attends to his business, and reads himself up a bit—for look you here, my boy," said Mr. Vallon, pushing his cup from him, and folding his brawny hands on the table, "a bit of learning in a man's head is like a pool o' water in a meadow; while there's more running into it, though it's ever so little, it'll keep good and fresh; but leave it shut in to itself, and it'll get stagnated and unwholesome, and breed all sorts o' disorders and unnatural things. So, as I was saying, Eppie, if he does as he ought—reads himself up a bit at the Institootion yonder, in his spare hours, why, I take it, he'll have enough to do all the week, without walking over here a good six mile; but as to Sundays, my lad, you know my opinion on them, and I know you won't cross me in it; it's the only thing I've got to ask of you, Kit, now you're a-starting in life, is that you'll

come home every Sunday. Perhaps I've got too strong notions on that matter; but I mean to bide by 'em. It's my opinion a lad can't well go wrong so long as he comes home of a Sunday. I'd even go so far as to say that if the Old Gentleman himself, supposin' he was once a lad beginning the world, had been made to spend his Sundays at home, he'd never 'a' been what he is."

Kit laughed, but gave his sacred promise to adhere to this simple talisman, which, by his father's account, might have wrought so wondrous and desirable a difference in the state of humanity in general. He then ventured to inquire how the little quarrel with his uncle Humphrey had terminated.

"My boy," answered the wheelwright, "your grandfather did it all with his fiddle, for which I am sure we are greatly beholden to him; for your uncle is your uncle, Kit, whatever his notions may be; and I'm a'most as much again' falling out with your own flesh and blood, as I am again' spending your Sundays away from home; and so you see, Christopher, we're much beholden to your grandfather for setting things to rights with his fiddle."

Christopher did not fail to make his acknowledgments to his grandfather, who stood at the door, with a pewter pot that flashed in the sunshine, waiting for his breakfast ale, blushing all over his bald head as he listened to these praises of his musical genius, and mumbling, "Not at all, not at all."

How grandfather Vallon "set things right with his fiddle" Constance had more than one opportunity of seeing that day. Whenever the conversation seemed likely to grow into a heated discussion, grandfather immediately raised his eyes to the shelf whereon his fiddle lay, and approaching it on tiptoe, took it down and began playing away vigorously, eyeing the disputants meanwhile with the air of a doctor who is administering some dangerously powerful restorative; and after listening awhile to the strains, though they were by no means harmonious or soothing, the wheelwright invariably gave up his part in the discussion, and said apologetically, —

"Thank you, father, thank you; we've recollected ourselves."

The meal over, the wheelwright donned his apron, kissed the baby, and went to work. Grandfather Vallon also encased his thin, long figure in a leather apron, that made him look like a white-headed bodkin in a sheath, and sallied forth to the workshop with a grave, business-like air; though he did little else in it but grind tools for his son, help him with his lunch ale, and occasionally play him a tune on the fiddle. As to Christopher, half an hour later found him melting glue over the fire, superintending the cutting-out of his new collars, and watching, with an odd mingling of curiosity, amusement, and suspicion, a certain little figure bending, with a perplexed and

weary face, over a sheet of writing-paper, as yet unsullied by the touch of the pen held over it. What manner of child or woman (for there was as much of the one as the other in her) could this be whom he had snatched from the most terrible of death's ministers? And what was that sad, unflinching purpose, mysterious, inexplicable, from which she never seemed to withdraw those steady, mournful eyes, or cease to follow with those firm, but weary feet? Was it for good or for evil?—selfish, or self-sacrificing? He remembered how he had actually asked her, that night down by the river, to confide her secret to him, and how she had refused, with a good deal of vexation; and he smiled to himself as he thought how little trouble it would be to him to find it out, if he chose to do so. Meantime, he had done his best to place their position in as reasonable and satisfactory a light as he could to his father and mother.

While Kit was stirring his glue, and making his reflections upon her thus, Constance, bending over that blank sheet of paper, was calling to her mind a scene that took place some seven or eight years back, in a darkened room of the old house at Aberford, and where she had seen for a few minutes the person to whom she was now trying to write—her mother's sister.

Leaning her cheek on her hand, and looking down at the paper, she seemed to see a form stretched upon

a bed, and a face with liquid, spiritual eyes, lifting itself heavenward from masses of black tangled hair, which the hands were tearing in the last agonies of death. One—a man—sat in a chair at the foot of the bed, with a white, unrumpled handkerchief to his eyes; another—a woman—also knelt beside the bed, with a face and form wonderfully resembling the face and form of the dying. Then it seemed to Constance the face sank down on the dishevelled hair, and lay there at perfect rest, so noble, so beautiful, that the room was no more dark; and ere long the figure crouching by the bedside arose, and Constance beheld a lady, tall and slender, like her mother, but, unlike her, showing pride and stateliness in every gesture. Moving to the foot of the bed, she turned eyes, full of passionate, vengeful grief, upon him who sat there with his white handkerchief to his face, and, pointing to the quiet form upon the bed, uttered words of bitter reproach. Then Constance remembered being caught up and held tightly in her arms, and wept over, and entreated and commanded, in a confused, passionate flow of words—not one of which she could recal—to come to her in any trouble, and she should find in her a mother.

The dark room and all within it vanished, but the vision had done its work; the pen flew over the paper fast—so fast as to perfectly astonish Kit, and yet not so fast as the loving, pleading words came

gushing from the heart that had at last opened fully and unrestrainedly at memory's touch. Here, surely, she felt, was a love strong enough to pity and help her, without trying to force from her that one secret which she must bear unrevealed to the end of life. She ran on about 'Duke, her love and her fear for him, and her great wish to get him to school, till the whole sheet was filled with her round school-hand, and Christopher quietly, and, as he thought, unseen, laid another near her; but she looked up and smiled sweetly and wonderingly, as one to whom anything in the shape of courtesy is strange, as she said — "Thank you, it is done."

"Is it?" said Christopher. "You'd better let me give it to grandfather, then, to go up the road and watch for the mail passing; he's got nothing else to do but fidget for his beer."

"There, then — wish it luck for us, Christopher."

One evening the wheelwright was at work in his garden. Three days of incessant rain had passed, during which the variegated border of flowers and vegetables before spoken of had grown at such a rate as to considerably narrow the path, and the young spring annuals were pricking up crisp and strong, and sending forth such long trailing shoots as quite baffled the wheelwright's skill in training, and made him glad of the assistance of those expert little brown hands that worked beside him. During two of these

days, Constance had been watching for an answer to her letter, about which all the family had shown nearly as much anxiety as herself. Old Grandfather Vallon would put down his fiddle, or even his beer, to look questioningly at Christopher, when he returned from his visits to the post-office, and say, "Tut! tut!" when Kit shook his head.

Kit had gone to the post-office this evening, and Constance, suddenly turning her head as she worked in the garden, saw him standing there with a letter in his hand. How she walked up the garden and into the house she scarcely knew; for now, as she stood in her little bedroom, her knees would not support her, and she had to kneel down and press her hands tightly to her side for some seconds before she could open the letter and discover her fate.

The tiny window, with its coarse calico curtains, admitted just enough of the tender April twilight to enable her to read it.

"MY DEAR NIECE,

"I am very much surprised to hear of the strange step you have just taken, and it is only a long knowledge of your father that keeps me from strongly urging you to return. I am now too unwell to inquire into your affairs, but shall do so as soon as I get stronger; in the meantime the request you make for your brother is so simple and clear, that I have no hesitation in granting it. I shall at once communicate

with John Vallon, the wheelwright, whom I know to be a most trustworthy man, and arrange all money matters with him. So place your brother at school as soon as you like. There is one on the Downs, near you—Summerfield's academy, Plantagenet House—which I can recommend highly. With wishes for your welfare,

“I am, my dear niece,

“Your affectionate aunt,

“JANE ARMSTRONG.”

Constance read her letter twice over, and cold, proud, and distant as its tone was, she rose to her feet with the elasticity of one who, travelling in the darkness, suddenly sees a light defining clearly the path she has been seeking. No longer was the aim of her heart a dim, hopeless thing, to be attained only by a hurrying on of weary little feet through the strange world, further and further away from where that heart so longed to rest. The blind impulse had become a possibility. The aim was to be won by work. The thought gave her wonderful strength—such strength that she felt, if needs be, rather than flinch from her purpose, she could and would meet *him*, and give him again her sad, firm challenge as she had done on that spring morning when he overtook them by the Plague-Stone at the beginning of their pilgrimage. She sat thinking, with her elbows fixed on the broad window-sill, till it grew too dark

to see the glimmer of the yard pavement through the trees; and then, taking her letter, she found her way down-stairs and into the parlour, where the wheelwright's family had assembled for the evening.

She slipped quietly in and sat down by Mrs. Vallon. Every one was anxious, yet every one forbore to question her concerning the letter she held. The room was silent for some minutes, except, indeed, that now and then Grandfather Vallon, who sat mending his fiddle, with his tools on a tea-tray, would make his chair creak and startle the baby, and draw upon himself a warning gaze from the brown eyes of his daughter-in-law, or perhaps let one of his tools fall on the table, and make the wheelwright say, reproachfully — "Have a care, father! have a care! He wants a bigger teaboard, Eppie." And Eppie would frown, and raise her eyebrows, and say she "hadn't patience!" Poor Mrs. Vallon, she had a sweet temper, but that sweet temper was sorely tried by her father-in-law, and the wheelwright had often much ado in keeping their warfare from destroying his domestic peace. He could have provided for the old gentleman elsewhere, but wisely reflecting that every woman, even one as sweet-tempered as his wife, "must let out her spirit on somebody," and that no one would have borne it so quietly as his father, he came to the conclusion that things had best remain as they were.

“Am I to read it out, my dear?” asked the wheelwright, as Constance put the letter in his hand.

“If you please, Uncle Vallon,” said she, for uncle was the name by which he had taught his little guests to call him.

And Uncle Vallon took the letter and read it slowly and feelingly, while Christopher laid down his book, and grandfather paused with his spectacles on his nose to listen. After the reading of the letter a silence ensued, which was broken by grandfather’s remarking it was “werry deep” — his usual verdict to anything he could not understand, or that sounded rather dreary.

“There, the sooner you get him rigged out, my dear, the better,” said the wheelwright, though to judge by the manner in which he patted ’Duke’s head, he was in no violent hurry to get rid of him.

After a long discussion between Mrs. Vallon and Constance, carried on in whispers under fear of grandfather’s fiddle, it was decided that ’Duke could not go until after the midsummer holidays; a most satisfactory conclusion to him, for life ad Peeler’s Pond in the bird-nesting season was not to be given up without a pang.

Mrs. Vallon then went into the kitchen to lay the cloth for supper, calling grandfather after her; and Kit and his father filled and lighted their pipes, and went for a turn in the garden, that the two

children might be alone to talk over their changed fortunes.

But it was Constance alone who talked. With 'Duke's head in her lap, she twined the curls that shone like gold in the firelight round and round her fingers, and, while her heart was faint and sick at parting from what alone made her exile endurable, she spoke with such a strong, hopeful voice in the child's ear, that his face began to flush, and his blue eyes to kindle, as he listened.

When the day of parting came round, sooner than it was wanted, as most days of parting do, it required all uncle Vallon's tender philosophy, and all grandfather's musical powers, to keep the children in good heart and fit them for their ordeal.

Up to the very last second that 'Duke was with her, Constance kept a smiling face and dry eyes, but when he had gone, when Mrs. Vallon [stuffed the baby in her arms to distract her thoughts, and grandfather began to play, her heart seemed suddenly to sink within her, and, laying the baby back in its crib, she ran out down the garden, and across the little stone yard, now all fragrant with clematis, and leaning against the black, tarred door, strained her eyes through the red light of the sunset for a last glimpse of him.

There lay the little valley flooded in the warmth and sparkle of the midsummer day. So wild and desolate an air enveloped the surrounding hills, that,

as the valley flashed upon the sight, in all its freshness and high cultivation, it reminded one of those visionary pictures of sea and air, which mariners sometimes mistake for land, and which fade as they try to approach them. The river flowed clear and strong between fields of long grass purple with clover, and under dark, high trees that here and there almost met across it. The little woods were, as yet, masses of rich dark green, untouched by yellow, and the whole valley, stretching out in its summer brilliancy and fulness, was like a splendid garden. It was a picture that would remain with her always, not for its own sake, but because it enclosed that little insignificant figure which walked last of a long file of boys winding slowly up the gorse-covered hill.

That same evening, as the bells of Aberford Minster chimed away the daylight softly and tenderly, an old man sat musing on the Plague-Stone.

The place retained but little of the beauty it had worn in spring-time, for the heath was dry and sunburnt, the hawthorns were recovering their look of weird old age; the little brook was still and sad, and under its clear water, dull, mud-coloured foliage waved with a slow and deathly motion. But in vivid and wonderful contrast to all this dreariness, there had sprung from a crack in the flags that formed the basement floor of the old Plague-Stone, one flower, a foxglove of rare and perfect beauty, that seemed wa-

ving with all the grace, and glowing with all the tints of an Eastern summer. It was over this the solitary man was pondering, as if wondering how such a thing could blossom from a stone. Very often did he come there now at the close of those sultry days, for home was not what it used once to be. No linnet sang in the dark parlour window, the very grape-vine forbore putting forth its few pale leaves this summer; but what moved him most, and filled him with all kinds of vague fancies and terrors, was that the dark old house seemed smitten from garret to base with decay and uncleanness. Now that the quiet, busy little form which used to move about it like a spirit of purity and health had passed away, it seemed as if it must inevitably rot and crumble panel by panel and stair by stair until the roof fell. Throughout the day while busy in the shop he was cheerful enough, and retained all his old pleasantness of manner; it was when the dusky evening crept on, and the cold, holy stars looked down upon him, and the shadow of the Minster wall fell upon his house front like a frown, when the beetles came in black, gleaming troops up the sloping parlour floor, and the shrill-voiced crickets leaped about the empty parlour grate, it was then that the dark fancies seized upon him and held him to his chair for long hours together, or made him flee from the house as if pursued.

At such times he nearly always bent his trembling,

uncertain steps across the path towards the old Plague-Stone; and there sat until the fresh heath air and solitude quieted his brain, and brought a healthier, though deeper sadness, over him. It was strange the comfort and vague dim promise that stone seemed to contain for him, in his darkest moments. One little blossom that changed with the months invariably greeted him, wafting him its perfume as he came across the heath, or waving near the stone with mysterious and suggestive beauty. The Plague-Stone indeed seemed the only point from which he could still hold a kind of far-off sorrowful communion with his children, while maintaining satisfactorily his position towards his fellow-men. Sometimes he felt as if the little wanderers, too, visited it and thought of him, and perhaps left him that never-failing blossom there as a token that they loved him still; and it often seemed to him that if ever he should clasp his boy to his heart again with the pride of an unreproachful and pure conscience, it would be at the grey old Plague-Stone. Time after time, while giving himself up to such imaginings as these, was he moved to press his hands over his ears to shut out the Minster bells, which seemed to take the voices of his children, and call to him to cast from him that numbing fear of his fellow-men, to take up the beautiful shame of repentance and follow them.

Still as yet that repentance, in spite of all he

suffered, was but a garment fluttering near him in a dream; he saw it, half-longed for it; but ever the fear of what it would reveal to men did he seize and wear it openly, held his hand paralysed.

So time passed on, week followed week, and the foxglove by the Plague-Stone shrivelled away, and a white convolvulus came in its place; month followed month, and the primroses were there again; year followed year, and still he lived his two lives — the guilty, suffering, but unrepentant father, and the honoured townsman of Aberford.

CHAPTER XI.

CALLED AWAY.

“AY, it’s his whistle, sure enough, old woman,” said the wheelwright, as, some five years later than the period referred to in the last chapter, they all stood at the door peering down through the darkness; “it’s Kit’s whistle, but I’m hanged if I knew the cut of him in that dandified coat! Grandfather!” he shouted, putting his head in at the door, and making a speaking-trumpet of his hands, “be so good as to set the light in the winder. Here he is!”

There was a whining answer from within, half of joy, half of complaint, and a blundering footstep across the room, but no light appeared at the window.

“Is he come? Is Christopher come? Oh, where is the light? How can I find the light, Jack?—you’re always forgetting I’m blind! O dear! O dear! where is it?”

The wheelwright drew his sleeve across his eyes, and muttered, “So I am, poor soul,” then shouted in at the door, “Never mind, father, sit ye still. He aint forgot the way, I’ll lay a wager.”

But one of the group quietly glided into the house, asking herself whether Christopher would care to see her awaiting him like one of the family—she, a stranger under his father’s roof. So she came in and set the candle in the window, and led the old man back to his seat and sat down beside him, listening, with him, for that well-known footstep. Meanwhile, before Christopher comes up the garden, we may as well mention two facts, which the flickering light in the window reveals. First, then, looking in at the little window, it is perceptible that the supper, though it is to celebrate Kit’s return for Christmas, is a sadly frugal one; and, moreover, the same light, zigzagging faintly down the garden, discovers to us a door flung back on its hinges and an empty stable.

“Jack Vallon,” the wheelwright’s brother-in-law had said to him, as a last warning against lifting his son above his “proper station,” “do this thing, and, mark my words, you’ll come to want. He’ll be always a-suckin’ and a-suckin’ of you like a leech, and your little bit

o' money 'll go like butter afore the sun. Set a chap half-way up a hill, an' it stands to reason as he'll make for the top, an' the higher he gets the more balance he wants. Draw back while there's time, Jack, and I'll help you to knock this thing out of his head and set his mind on something else; or go on, and, mark my words, you'll come te want."

Jack Vallon had gone on—had, through heavy expenses on Christopher's account, come to want; yet he did not regret, and smiled contentedly while Humphrey Standish crowed over him, answering, "Let us wait and see."

Christopher's apprenticeship had been up half a year, during which time he had been employed in London on an experiment likely to prove of great importance to him, as well as to his employers, if successfull. After long suspense, there had come, this Christmas week, a letter from Kit, which brought new life to the wheelwright, and made him exult in all the hardships to which he had exposed himself for his boy's sake, and which sent Mrs. Vallon off by coach to "The Waggoner's Rest" in such a transport of pride that she knew not what she was about; and was reminded by Mrs. Standish, in the midst of her eulogy on Kit, that she had put her best cap on over her old one. It was unanimously agreed that Christopher was to know nothing of the sacrifices that had been made at home for him, save those which

were obvious, as in the case of Tommy's disappearance. "It 'ud be hard, you know, Eppie, for the lad, now he's got a bit o' money, to be fancyin' it his duty to make us returns; so let's keep things as smooth as we can while he's here," the wheelwright said, "and we'll draw in again when he's gone. There's the old watch and the blunderbuss still, you know; and, if all comes to all, why, there's such a thing as letting the place and going into two rooms; but don't grizzle—that's far off yet, thank God."

The whistle stopped as the footsteps came up the garden, quickening to a run; and, in another instant, a lot of bags and parcels were cast down on the doorstep, and Kit's poor, worn mother was crying on her boy's shoulder; and, in spite of the wheelwright's warning nudge, was pouring into his ear a torrent of miseries.

"My boy! my boy! so he's really come home! And you mustn't be ashamed of us, Kit dear, if you find things different to what you've bin used to; I don't say as it's your fault, dear, because I know your father's never let you know anything about it; but it's bin such a time with us, Kit—with me, at least. Your father—bless him!—he never feels nothing, and I do my best, God knows, to keep that from him; but it's me it all falls on, Kit; and the time I've had of it there's no tongue can tell—trouble on trouble. There's your little brother Georgy, as good

a child as ever was born, so far as morals go, but always in the dirt, or tormenting of his grandfather; and there's him, poor soul, getting more and more of a baby every day of his life; and Georgy's ruined his fiddle, and he can't see to mend it, and sits cryin' over it so as you never saw the like. And O dear! O dear! what's to become on us God A'mighty only knows!"

"Come, come, Eppie, there's time enough for talking over troubles," said the wheelwright, gently unclasping her hands to free Kit. "Come, come into the light, my man, and let's see what six months of town life has done for you."

They picked up the carpet-bags and parcels from the door-step and entered the kitchen, now cheery enough with bright household things and a hissing fire.

"Upon my soul I shouldn't have known him!" cried the wheelwright, never ceasing to shake Kit's hand as he examined him from head to foot. "Is *this* the style of coat they're wearing now, my boy? Bless my soul!"

Christopher's roar of laughter at his father's astonishment was broken in upon by a cry from poor old Grandfather Vallon, who was fumbling across the room to get to him.

"Why, what's the matter, grandfather?" said Kit, laying his hands on his shoulders and looking into

his face, startled to see his eyes staring right beyond him. "Father, what's the matter?"

The wheelwright shook his head and turned away, and the old man clung about his grandson, sobbing like a child.

"I can't see you, Christopher; I'm blind, my boy—stone blind. Oh, what shall I do? I want to see him so! Let me see him! Christopher! Christopher!"

Christopher pushed him from him and burst into tears. Out in the world they called him somewhat hard and impenetrable, and it is true his nature was not one to be easily moved; but this cry, this helpless cry, of Grandfather Vallon penetrated to his very marrow, and hurt him like a sword-thrust. He led the long, trembling, clinging figure to the arm-chair, and silently and almost tenderly seated it, while the old man still kept crying out that he wanted to see him—he must see him.

"Come, grandfather," said Kit, as soon as he could speak, "let me unpack the present I've got for you, and while I'm doing it see if you can guess what it is."

"What does he say?" asked the old man of his son while Kit was busy unpacking a huge parcel. The wheelwright applied his hands to his ears as a speaking-trumpet again, and shouted, loud enough to be heard out on the green—

“He says he’s got a present for you, worth having, you know. Come all the way from London.”

“Eh, a present? What’s the use of it to me? Take it away, lad—I can’t see it. Take it away.”

“Ay, but you *can* hear it, grandfather. Look here: put it against you, so. Now take this in your other hand—there! Now do you know what it is?”

The trembling hand with the violin stick fell to work; the deadened sense of the ear quickened at the loved sounds; and the poor, weary heart woke from its stupor. He played one of his favourite old airs carefully through, and then sat down and felt his new treasure all over, with tears streaming down his cheeks the while.

“Did you ever see such a lad?” shouted the wheelwright through his hands. “And he’s come back such a gentleman! I didn’t know his cut myself at first.”

“I always said as he’d be a gentleman, I did,” answered Grandfather Vallon, with a touch of pride in his piping voice; “I’ve said so ever since he used to make me go down on my knees to be his horse, and ride on me like a lord markiss, haven’t I, Eppie? Ah, my boy, you’ve done me good. How come you to think on your poor, good-for-nothing old grandfather up at London? But he’s done me good, Jack; and I’ll try and not be a worrit to Eppie while it pleases God A’mighty to spare me.”

“Now don’t go to talk i’ that way, grandfather,

don't," said Eppie. "Worrit, indeed! Why, what should we all do without you?"

While the two were hanging about the old man, comforting him and describing to him the beautiful appearance of the violin, Christopher looked round the dear old place with a vague presentiment of discovering more sad changes. But no; such changes as had really taken place had been carefully concealed to-night. The quiet little figure sitting in the gloom by the clock-case waited for the bright, roving brown eyes to turn her way. They were some time before they reached that corner, so that she had opportunity of judging for herself of the talked-of change in Christopher's appearance.

That this last year or two had been different to every other year of Christopher's life it was easy to perceive. The lax, easy expression of the mouth, and the confident glance, had given place to a look of slight uncertainty and calm observance. The lesson had, without doubt, been many times repeated for him, that he, like other men, could only win the success that he had once looked upon as a free gift of Providence by constant struggle, and with the best years of his life. But there was also that in his face which declared that he had accepted it at that price; that on no account would he let it pass from him—a calm, firm courage, which none but eyes such as Constance's, which knew him well, could have perceived.

To others, the change in Christopher's face would seem by no means an improvement; for all that bright, fearless gaiety which had made his presence have the effect of a wild, sunny March day on the spirits, and gave an impression of his being remarkably handsome, had entirely disappeared; and now he could be taken for nothing more than a well-built, agreeable young fellow—gentlemanly, because so perfectly unaffected, easy, and self-sustained.

Constance was still looking at him and wondering whether his face had lost or gained most, and rather inclining to decide on the former, when the roving eyes met her own, and lighted up with recognition.

“Christopher!”

She had started forward to meet him the instant their eyes met. Christopher clasped the little brown hand and smiled; and while the clasp and the smile lasted, Constance said joyfully within herself, “He is the same—the very same.” For often had she shaken her head as she sat at her close, wearying work, and said to herself, “This Christopher, this good friend who has done so much for you, and whose return you look forward to with more pleasure than you have known for years, is, ten chances to one, long ere this dead to you, and one will return in his place with whom you can have nothing in common.”

But this glow of friendly confidence was of brief duration, for Christopher had hardly touched her hand

than he let it go again, and the smile seemed to vanish under the shade of some unpleasant recollection.

“Is the parlour open to the public to-night?” he asked the wheelwright as he took a candle from the table; “because I’ve some news for Miss Chorley, and if it is we’ll go in there, and I’ll deliver it up before supper.” It must here be mentioned of the wheelwright that though, during the day-time, he had for years been accustomed to leave all the members of his family pretty much to their own devices, he had been exceedingly particular that the evening should find them in as high a state of civilisation as was compatible with existing circumstances. The parlour used to be kept under lock and key all day; but in the evening, when he came in from his gardening, the wheelwright, divesting himself of his boots outside the door, would unlock it himself, and place a bouquet of fresh flowers on the polished table, light the oil-lamp, and take down a well-bound book or two from the bookshelf of stained deal which Kit had made, and distribute them about the room. There had been a time when the parlour was pervaded by the light of two golden heads, and the prattling of two little tongues; and the wheelwright had then often fancied himself in a land of beauty and music such as Christopher sometimes read of in the Eastern tales. When these heads, and all the hopes with which he had encompassed them, as he watched them, week by

week, rising a little higher than the table, were laid to rest in the cold earth, the parlour had been shut up for a while. But it was not many days before the wheelwright's boots were seen outside the door again, and his fresh flowers on the table; for, as the patriarchs of old made acknowledgment of the mercy of their God towards them by sacrifices more or less costly, so it had ever been his wont to make this room a shrine on which to display, in humble gratitude, the extent of his prosperity.

And now again the parlour had been long closed. But as Kit spoke, the wheelwright rose and set about unlocking it with great alacrity; yet, owing to two or three little alterations he had to arrange ere it could be seen by Christopher—such as placing some books in the gap on the mantelpiece left by the disappearance of the pretty bronze timepiece, and filling up sundry other vacancies—owing, I say, to this, it was several minutes before he returned, flustered and blushing at the deception he was practising, and announced that the parlour was at Kit's service.

Constance had remained still just where Christopher had dropped her hand, and now she followed him into the parlour mechanically, and stood resting one hand on the table, listening for his first words with a patient, stony kind of dread on her face.

"I dare say you guess what it is?" Christopher said with his old bluntness.

“Has it come at last, then? — have you seen him?” she asked, almost inaudibly, but calmly, as if prepared for anything.

“No, I have not; but he is at Todness, and I found this at my lodgings to-night, inclosed in an envelope addressed to me.”

She took the letter from him, and, as she read the words, “To be forwarded to Miss Constance Chorley,” started, for the familiar hand seemed to bring the writer suddenly and vividly before her.

“Sit down,” said Christopher, pushing her a chair. “Shall I go or stay while you read it?”

“Stay, Christopher, if you please,” she answered, dropping into the chair.

She broke the black seal quickly, drew out the letter, and began to read it with compressed lips, and eyes that seemed prepared to take in unflinchingly anything that might await them. The first closely-written sheet was read through and turned before Christopher saw any change in the resolute face, which he watched narrowly; but the eyes had not traversed many lines of the next before they began to fill, and the firm mouth to quiver at the corners. For a few seconds she was blinded and could not go on; but, after letting the tears flow quietly down, pattering on the letter, she held it nearer the candle, and continued to read from the line where she had left off, and from which we will follow her.

“But all I have written, Constance, cannot convey to you an idea of what I suffer hourly, day and night. I feel as if I already knew the loneliness of the grave, and often pray to the Almighty to give me the unconsciousness of the grave also. I do not say but that some in this cold world have shown me great kindness, but how can the kindness of strangers be anything but gall and wormwood to me when I remember that my own child has withdrawn herself from me, as not being worthy to breathe the same air with her? O Constance, dear Constance, remember my age and my helplessness! You will, I know, have pity, and return to one who feels the great need he has of his children, and of the comfort of their presence. Yes, you will come, I feel assured. You will get this to-night, and to-night you will come to the address enclosed, where you will find a woman who will bring you to me. Do not be surprised or startled at any condition you may find me in. Again I say, I am waiting.—Your miserable father,

“D. C.”

Christopher, I think, would hardly have liked to remain in the room could he have guessed how every word of that letter would pierce the young heart whose timidity and strength of love in leaving her home he had once mistaken for hardness.

When she had read the last word, the letter dropped on to the floor, and she sat with her hands clasped

in her lap, a picture of white, dry-eyed misery. Was it remorse, or what? Christopher asked himself, as he watched her motionless, silent figure minute after minute; but whatever it might be, he saw that she must needs be roused; and, after hunting about for something to say as commonplace as the circumstances would admit, observed—

“I was afraid I was bringing you bad news, for I heard, where I stopped for a few minutes on my way from London, that Mr. Chorley had left Aberford, and that the old place was all shut up: I could not learn why from the person who told me.”

Constance evidently had not taken in the sense of his words, but his voice seemed to awaken her from her trance of grief. She lifted her arms as a child does in pain, and then let them fall heavily on the table, clasping her hands together.

“Christopher, I must go to him—I must go now directly. Where am I to go? Where is the letter?”

She took it up from the floor, looked at the address endorsed, “Weaver’s Cottages, Todness,” and then as she glanced hurriedly over it and her eyes fell upon the words, “Do not be surprised at any condition you may find me in,” a fresh spasm of pain flitted over her face, and, turning to Christopher, she said—

“Tell me, please, Christopher, how I am to get to Todness to-night.”

“Well, certainly we shall have to walk there,” he returned. “There is no alternative, if you must go to-night.”

“*We*, Christopher? But you are not going? Oh, no, let me go alone.”

“If you wish to lose your way and arrive there some time to-morrow, go alone; but if you have any thoughts of getting there to-night, you had better let father or me go with you.”

“But to take you away from them this evening! No, no. Please, Christopher, tell me all about it, and let me go by myself.”

Christopher said no more, but went out into the kitchen. When Constance came down-stairs a few minutes afterwards, with her cloak and bonnet on, she found him waiting for her.

“I’ve explained it all to them,” he said, “so you need only just go in and wish them good-bye.”

And she did so, holding her hand out to each with a beseeching gaze, that seemed to say, as plainly as words could, “Please do not speak to me.”

“Good-bye, my lass,” said the wheelwright; “I was going to say and I hope it’s only for the present; but I don’t know that I ought.”

Mrs. Vallon cried a little, and said as soon as ever she had a blessing it was took away from her; and Grandfather Vallon complained that he didn’t a bit know what was going on — nobody took the trouble of

explain anything to him, though he was sure he wasn't so very deaf, let them say what they liked.

The leave-takings were over, the door closed after them; and, while Christopher was unlocking the high black door at the end of the garden, Constance turned to throw a hurried farewell look on the spot which had been her home for so long. For the moment she scarcely had a feeling of regret, her heart being taken up with the engrossing desire to reach her father; but years afterwards, as, with swimming eyes, she recalled that wintry little picture of the cottage set in the white garden, with the lights glimmering through the leafless trees that rose high above the roof, and stood against the cold, brilliant sky like delicate, fantastic pencilling, she felt that, had she dreamt of all that awaited her beyond that door, in her deep thankfulness for the interval of peace that the wheelwright's roof had afforded her, she must have stooped and kissed the little white yardstones as she crossed them.

"Come," said Christopher, "it's a splendid night, and we shall be able to go along over the cliffs when we get beyond Fairleigh, and so save three-quarters of a mile. It'll be a little slippery, but I've got my stick, you see. Now, Merrylegs, don't wake all the parish."

And so, as they crossed the green, Christopher contrived, with his old adroitness, to turn into quite a commonplace matter-of-fact occurrence what in most

cases would have been an awkward and peculiar one; and Constance walked along at his side, finding comfort and strength in his presence; and listening with a vague pleasure to the sound of his voice, but scarcely understanding a word he said, for in her heart was but one thought, one speculation — her father. How should she find him? How would he receive her?

CHAPTER XII.

FORTUNE'S WHEEL TAKES ANOTHER TURN.

THE three old churches of Todness were clanging forth a late hour of the night when Constance, Christopher, and Merrylegs came within sight of the town.

Now, to look down upon Todness from where they stood — namely, the cliff flanking it on the east — is, under any aspect, to look upon as fair a picture as can be found from beginning to end of the Borrockshire coast: but on this brilliant winter's night, when the moonlight came dazzling down upon the snow-covered cliffs that rose on each side of the town; on the snow-covered meadows which went sloping up behind the town; on the foam-bordered sea, that roared and sucked the beach in front of the town; and on the town itself, blinking with its Saturday night lights, and all wet and glistening under a thaw; on this same winter's night, it was a sight well worth such a jour-

ney as our friends on the east cliff had had, to behold. Not that the town itself could lay claim to more beauty or stateliness than the most weather-beaten of tars who rolled up and down its narrow, bustling streets from morn till night, with hat-ribbons and trowser-bottoms fluttering in the wind. To say truth, indeed, Todness partook much of the aspect of these worthies. Like theirs, its original complexion had long ago been blotted out by the sun and wind and sea passions; like them, too, it seemed to have strange ideas of proportions, squeezing itself in where it should be wide, and letting itself out where it should be narrowed off. Yet, withal, one could not find fault with the old place, any more than with these good-humoured salt-water veterans whom it so much resembled—not only in its rollicking ungainliness and self-assertion, but also in its air of hale maritime freshness.

“If I’m not mistaken,” said Christopher, as they descended the hill, “Weaver’s Cottages are somewhere in the fishing-place down there.”

“Yes,” answered Constance under her breath, “this is the place.”

“And there’s your guide!” exclaimed Kit.

A woman advanced from the door of one of a row of trim, small cottages, faced with rough stones, that glistened darkly as the snow rolled off and fell in heaps upon the little gardens, and said, “Miss Chorley, I believe?”

Constance bent her head in answer, and then with a sickening dread toiled after her guide. Street after street, court after court, was entered and left behind, until at last she found they had altogether quitted the old town, and were walking on the magnificent esplanade of St. Clement's, and her courage sank still more at the sight of the apparently endless line of cold, stately houses to be passed ere they could come upon any roof humble enough to harbour Daniel Chorley.

The cold was intense. The snow, which at Todness could not keep its place on the comfortable, warm old houses, here clothed the broad, desolate parade from end to end, clung to the stone-work of the tall mansions, and lay even on the beach, mingling with the foam of the incoming tide, and making the expanse of surging waters more intensely black.

Constance was just wrapping her little grey cloak more closely round her, and trying not to see the distance she thought she had still to go, when her guide stopped:—

“Now, miss, this is the house.”

Constance put up her veil and looked at it. It stood apart from the straight line, a little back—a solid, square house, the oldest in St. Clement's. A lawn sloped from the ground-windows to the low stone wall outside of which they stood. The roof formed a terrace commanding all the splendid sweep of country behind, and sea before. A tall tree, draped in

snow, stood making ghostly motions on each side of the square portico. From the three centre windows, and from the glass over the door, a brilliant light was streaming.

Just these points Constance noticed in the confused glance she turned upon the house, then hastily laid her hand upon the woman's arm as she raised it towards the bell, saying, in a trembling voice, more to herself than to her guide —

“This is wrong. It is not here. I am sure it is not here!”

The guide pulled the bell, and then turned and stared at Constance leisurely from head to foot. Constance bit her lip, and endeavoured to conceal the strange flutter that had come over her, to prepare herself to take, calmly and without surprise, whatever might come next, and to convince herself it was all a mistake.

The door was opened quickly; and a liveried footman, with a key in his hand, cautiously descended the slippery steps. Constance looked at him wistfully, in the hope of finding in his face some index to this fresh page of strange events.

The gate was unlocked, the guide had gone, and Constance was following the footman up the steps, who said, in an inquisitive manner —

“Master expects you, I believe?”

But Constance did not answer. She followed the

man up-stairs, passing handsome windows through which the moonlight entered like many-coloured fluids — passing them without wonder, without interest, for her head was giddy with the sudden change from cold to heat, and the only feeling she had was a longing for the mistake to be over — a longing to be out in the cold again, searching for the humble place where *he* lay in sickness and in trouble.

Suddenly a door was opened before her. The warm air and bright light of a drawing-room fell upon her face. She was shrinking back, when her eyes discerned a form which held her on the treshold.

It was her father.

Mr. Chorley was alone in the drawing-room. He was seated in an arm-chair before the fire, and had not heard or seen her enter, for the servant had opened the door noiselessly, and glided down-stairs again without announcing her.

It was strange, but during those few seconds she stood watching him, Constance felt all her bewilderment and dizziness vanish, and her brain seemed to grow suddenly calm and keen, so that she could hold every emotion in control whilst she looked and judged.

It has already been mentioned that a fresh and gentlemanly toilette had always been looked upon by Mr. Daniel Chorley as one of the great necessities of life; and that, even under most adverse circumstances, he had managed to maintain so respectable an appear-

ance as to gain for himself the appellation of "the old gentleman." Now, therefore, there could be no striking contrast in that respect; still there was for Constance a new magnificence in the sight of her father in his Indian quilted yellow silk dressing gown, with crimson facings and crimson silk cord and tassels. Then, too, he appeared in the very flower of health and prosperity. He had never looked so well as now, when his daughter, in answer to the voice of trouble he had sent to her, gave up every resolve she had worked so hard to keep; and came, half broken-hearted with remorse, to his aid.

He looked up, all unaware of the pale face by the door, looked impatiently towards that door, and encountered suddenly his child's eyes. For an instant he was held mute and moveless by their gaze, so severe was it, so inexpressibly mournful, yet, withal, so loving.

What did she mean by that look? How dared she look like that? He grew a shade paler, and, trusting to work upon that love he saw flickering out like a light through the sternness of the face, he held out his arms.

"Constance, dear child, is it you?"

Two spirits were at war within her, and he saw it. He knew that one voice cried, "He has deceived me! He has acted a lie in order to get me here to dazzle and overpower me, and make me give 'Duke up.'" While

another still more impetuously cried, "Let me go! It is my father holding his arms out to me, after all I have done against him — my father, whom I have not seen for years!"

Silent, and with a mask of love, he watched the conflict on her face, waiting to rule his actions according to the victory.

He had not long to wait.

"Father! father! father!"

She was down on the rug at his feet, sobbing out the name unuttered for years, clasping his knees with the vehemence of that little two-year-old child who used to cling to him with such wearying tenacity. He remembered even now how he could never take to the plain little thing, and how at times he had been half frightened of the heart beating under the baby pinafore with such strength of love, such passionate remorse for every little error it committed. He had often chided her harshly when she showed what he called an exaggerated sorrow for a fault. As she had grown older, it had at times seemed to Daniel Chorley that God had sent him this child in a spirit of chastisement, and to supply a certain faculty which he considered men with good sense and caution were as well, certainly more comfortable, without — namely, conscience. When he had been about to make some questionable business transaction, or to utter some commonplace white lie, just as other men asked themselves, "Can I do this on

my conscience?" he, scarcely aware that he did so, asked himself, "Does she know it? What will she say?"

Conscience is not a thing to be much loved; it gives us too much cause for fear; it vexes, exasperates us with its "still small voice." And so it was with Daniel Chorley, as he looked upon his conscience, his little daughter lying there at his feet, sobbing forth, in the fond repetition of that word, "Father! father!" all the pent-up love and secret anguish of years. He looked upon her, and he feared her still, for he saw she was the same.

Presently, something—it might have been the sparkling of his diamond ring in the firelight—recalled that look, which had so annoyed him, to her face again, and she rose up quickly. Before she could speak he took her hand, and said excitedly—

"Constance, I have not called you back to poverty and hard work; I am rich. Your mother's sister has left me everything—left 'Duke, I mean; she has left 'Duke everything when he comes of age; but meantime the property is in my hands for the benefit of us all. Yes, it is ours at last. We ought to have had it long ago. Colonel Armstrong, to whom the estates originally belonged, never acknowledged me when I married his younger and favourite sister,—your mother, you know. But, having no children of his own, and being very proud, and anxious about the perpetuation of his name and family, he would have taken

my first-born child to be his heir, had he been a son. But you came instead; and so the chance passed away, for he left all to his eldest sister, your aunt, Jane Armstrong. Well, now, she, too, is dead; and in dying has behaved very properly, — I may say, handsomely, — in giving everything to 'Duke, who will have to take the Armstrong name when he comes of age.

“So you shall be a lady, Constance; yes, you shall have everything that money can give you; and your brother — ah, my boy, my clever little 'Duke! — he shall be a great man. Who knows, Constance, perhaps he may be a baronet one of these days? How is he? Is he much grown? Is he stronger? Why didn't you bring him? What's the matter? Good God, Constance! he isn't ill? Speak, girl, speak?”

“No, father, no!” she said, drawing back; “'Duke is well, but —”

“But what?” cried Mr. Chorley, impatiently.

“Father, he cannot be what you say!”

“What do you mean, Constance?”

“I mean, father, 'Duke must not come home.”

Mr. Chorley took a turn or two up the room before he could quiet himself sufficiently to speak. She guessed what his thoughts were as he did so, and the tears stole silently down her cheeks. Meeting him half-way across the room, she laid both her hands on his arm, and said —

“Oh, why did you bring this up again? why did

you make me speak the words that it breaks my heart to say? You shouldn't have deceived me, father! You shouldn't have deceived me! I thought you had been very poor and ill, and I could not stay away from you when you asked me to come, as if it were to help you and nurse you. Father, you are rich and well; you do not want us; let us go on in our own way; I cannot make what you say of 'Duke, but I will try and make him a good man."

There was a look of incredulous pity as well as anger in his face as he said —

"And you mean to tell me that you would really prefer continuing this beggarly kind of life to living here with every luxury?"

"I do, father."

"And why, pray?"

It was a foolish question to have asked; he felt so the instant it quitted his lips. His colour rose, but he waited for her answer with his eyes fixed defiantly on her face. She returned his gaze with one of sorrowful surprise.

"Why, father?"

"Yes, *why?*" he cried, stamping his foot with a sudden burst of rage. "Constance, this is too absurd! Because I gave you my confidence, my —"

He paused a second at seeing the peculiar hysterical smile that flitted over her face, which seemed to say, "*Gave* me, father! Did you *give* me your confidence that night?"

“Because,” went on Mr. Chorley, “because, I repeat, you have my confidence, do you think you are no longer my child? Listen, Constance. I tell you plainly, there has been enough of this; I have fully made up my mind to put an end to it. First, I want ’Duke, I can now give him chances that I have longed to obtain for him ever since his birth. I want you, too. It is necessary you should be trained and made fit to preside over my household, and you ought to be proud to do so; it is not many fathers who would desire to keep a daughter at home after receiving such treatment at her hands as I have at yours. But more than that, Constance, you must remember that one in my position has the world to consider. As things were, it mattered little in what relations we stood to each other; now it is very different. Such an arrangement as you are mad enough to want would create no end of wonder and gossip, and prove most damaging to my prospects. Come now, Constance,” he continued, softening his tone a little as he saw the face looking whiter and more rigid, “give over thinking and acting for yourself—it is wearing you out, my poor child; you are but a child, and it is unnatural for you to take so much upon you. Think of the life you may lead—think of the pleasure you will have in watching ’Duke’s progress—think of the attention you will attract in the world some day with such a brother.”

Poor Constance listened. She was wearied out with

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Poor Constance listened. She was wearied out with

her long and toilsome night-walk, faint — for she had touched no food since noon — and dizzy with wonder at the good fortune which seemed to have fallen upon her father by magic. She was, therefore, at this moment, in no very heroic frame of mind. Fearful of erring either way, she listened until he had ceased speaking, and then sat some seconds in bewildered silence.

She sat so perfectly still, and so pallid-looking, that Mr. Chorley, to assure himself she had not fainted, laid his hand on her shoulder, and said gently —

“Constance!”

She took the hand, laid her cold cheek upon it, and said, with a fresh burst of tears —

“Oh, father! you shouldn’t talk to me of being rich; I haven’t any care for it, indeed; *that* would never blind me or make me act wrongly; but when you talk of ‘Duke, and of his new position, and what it might do for him, I don’t know how to think or what to do. And when you say you want me, father, and think that I could do for you now in this grand place as I did there at home — when you say this I feel as if it would break my heart to keep away; but still, father, still I fear — I fear. It seemed so plain to me when I did this that I ought to do it — so terribly plain.”

“Well, Constance, I am glad to hear you talk sensibly at last; now, perhaps, there may be some chance of bringing you to reason. As I have said before, you must remember that there was not the least occasion

for me to make this appeal to you—in the eyes of the world, not the least—for I had every right to command you; but wishing to avoid the possibility of any recurrence to that painful subject in the future, and wishing, as I always do, to consider your feelings, I thought it best to bring you here thus, and come to a right understanding with you at once. And now listen to me.”

And as well as her utter weariness, and her half-happy, half-fearful agitation would let her, Constance did listen while he talked of his plans, and gave her the particulars of the inheritance. The only thing of all he said that she clearly understood was, that he intended to return anonymously, or under the name of conscience-money, a certain sum to a certain office; and, hearing that, she laid her hands under her cloak, palm to palm, and in one long sigh all her soul rose in prayer to God for his blessing on the deed.

From that instant she felt her fate was sealed, and she sat a little while, calm and still. Mr. Chorley went to a sideboard to get her a little wine, and when he brought it he found her gazing round wildly, with her hands pressed to her forehead. In that moment a sense of all the change had come rushing upon her brain so overwhelmingly, that she felt it failing her.

“Is it true? Am I at home? Is it all true?” she murmured; and before Mr. Chorley could extend an arm to save her, the figure fell forward, and lay, in

its shabby clothes, cold and still as death, on his rich carpet, and he stood looking at it, sorely bewildered, for he did not like to call the servants.

CHAPTER XIII.

DOWN BY THE SEA.

CHRISTOPHER did not return to Peeler's Pond that night, but about two hours after he had seen Constance Chorley enter the terraced house at St. Clement's he went back to seek a lodging in Todness; but Kit did not sleep. He kept wide awake and restless the whole night long—so restless, indeed, that when the first peep of day showed him the mast-tops nodding in the fresh breeze behind the little black houses, his endurance was at an end; and, rising, he put on his clothes, removed the cockleshells and seaweed which decorated the window-sill, and, opening the window, let himself drop lightly on to the yielding shingle.

Kit turned his face in the direction from which the wind blew, because it was so strong and unfailing that he could almost lean his hot brow upon it, and that direction chanced to be St. Clement's.

Now there was, only a short distance from Mr. Chorley's house—which half a century ago stood alone on St. Clement's shore—a kind of rude beach chamber. A line of rocks, a groyne, the sea, and the huge seawall guarding the town promenade, were its four boun-

daries; and its yielding floor, strewn at each tide with fresh sea wonders, changed in light and colour with every change of the fitful sky that formed its roof. At early morning, when a faint tinge of rose-light came stealing along the cold grey sands, and the limpet-covered rocks threw their pointed shadows on the wet shingle, there was an air of elfish mystery about the spot, as though wild sea spirits had held their revelries there all night. In the glare of noon it was like a beautiful garden perishing for rain. The seaweed rustled as the breeze touched it, lifting it mockingly, as though to bear it to the sea, then dropping it again, and leaving it to dry and wither in the sun. The shell-fish shrivelled in the shell, the starfish grew limp on the hot stones, and along the bleached road of the groyne came thousands of creeping things in search of prey, and the dead fish was black with sunflies.

But at night, when every separate pebble was made lustrous by the heavy sea dew and the moonlight, and the sands grew white in patches and circles, as if they were being dried by the feet of invisible dancers, then all the great sea seemed to turn to it in a passion of remorse for its neglect, prostrating itself before it with great cries, and adoring it with mysterious song—now sweet and tender, and accompanied with gifts fresh from its deep treasure-hold; now wild and complaining, and a savage snatching back of all,

and then again stealing on doubtfully with low sobs and inarticulate murmurs, or only a sound like the throbbing of a heart too full for utterance. All the withered and impure things it swept away; and in their place strewed fresh fair shells and seaweed, in feathery garlands of soft sea colours and rich bars of greenish gold, and so decorated it till it appeared a strip of a new and wonderful land.

Here, in the grey dawn of the Sunday morning, the only restless thing to be seen, save the sea and the dipping sea-gulls, paced Christopher Vallon.

It was a new place to him, but was such a spot as we all of us have somewhere — a corner of the wide earth wherein to come as to a temple, and let the soul unveil.

Something had passed out of Christopher's life during this night — something the presence of which he had never owned, but which had been with him for five years, and never, whether at his work, or in his walks, or in his dreams, never leaving him. It had stolen over his life imperceptibly, like faint February sunshine over a landscape, which deepens so gradually in intensity that we hardly know it is the sunshine, making it beautiful until the sun goes down, and leaves it cold and grey.

As the first sickening sense that he had endured such a loss came upon Christopher he was bewildered, and attributed it to the close atmosphere of his little

room; but when he found that it followed him out into the fresh air, and pressed upon him closer and closer, he turned upon himself fiercely to know what it meant; he took it with him into this wild, wrestling chamber of his, which had seen him throw many a strong enemy — fierce pride, bitter disappointment, and sore despondency — but never a one like this. Nevertheless, he defied it scornfully, and grappled with it with all his strength.

But in vain, poor Kit; this was not to be thrown — this was not to be numbered amongst his triumphs.

Exhausted with walking up and down ankle-deep on the beach, he threw himself on the groyne, and buried his face in his hands. The tears came into his eyes — tears, not of pain, but of shame and vexation, such as he had shed often on these stones before, when forced to bow to the sway of passions he felt unmanly, and whose power he had denied until they overwhelmed him. Not that he bowed before this antagonist. No; though it proved too strong for him now, he would never surrender; he would starve and mortify, weaken and crush it by degrees, but never surrender.

So, sitting down upon the groyne, he amused himself with looking scornfully at the loss which this enemy, this dragging pain at his heart, the like of which he had never felt before, would fain make him believe he had sustained.

It had come upon him, this pain, with the closing

of the door of that grey house upon a slender figure in black; and had clung to him tenaciously through all these intervening hours, crying to him to behold how a sudden shadow had swept over his life; and how that success, which yesterday made him feel such quiet, happy strength in himself, now stirred in him nothing but scorn. And at this moment, when Christopher, in spirit, shook his fist at it, and defiantly bade it show him to the uttermost that loss of which it raved, it answered him with such a storm of mournful, passionate eloquence that he was stupefied, hardly able to credit that the voice proceeded from the depths of his own being, and sat listening as though it were the sea that spoke, or some other separate and distinct thing.

“What loss? what loss?” it said; “go back into life and work again, and by slow and painful degrees thou shalt discover. If, indeed, thou art ignorant now of the hope, dim and unconfessed, which thou hast cherished, which hath kept thee subdued and earnest at thy work, then all the more shalt thou be haunted by its ghost, now that it is dead. It shall meet and greet thee at all times and at all places where it hath been with thee before, and whereat thou hast disowned it. It shall meet and greet thee, this dead hope, in the image of a sweet, pale face thou knowest, at busy street corners, in thy work-room, where it was with thee, though thou didst deny it, giving cunning to thy

hand. Open the ledger, and it shall smile faintly upon thee through the figures; go where thou wilt, it shall be with thee, and thou shalt know it for a ghost, the reality of which is gone, for ever gone!" And the sea waves, breaking in mournful rhythm at his feet, repeated, "Gone, for ever gone!"

"Gone, for ever gone!" they said; and Kit, in listening for one moment, took his foot from his enemy's neck, for one moment only; but in that moment it leapt up, measured its strength against him, and he fell — fell, writhing under the shame, the half-terror of a man who feels a part of his being, hitherto held in subjection, all at once assert itself and overwhelm him utterly. To Kit — Kit, with his happy scorn for all sickly sentiment, all unhealthy affections, this was actual pain.

He crushed his face against the stones, genuine and vehement in his surrender as he had been in his resistance; nay, even finding in that surrender a wild throe of delight mixed with the shame; and he knew not which it was that made him tremble all over, as, muffling his voice in the stones, he cried —

"It is true I love her! I am a fool! I love her!"

Now once confessed, it was not in Kit's nature to try to diminish his love in his own eyes; on the contrary, since he had to bear such a burden, he would rather see in it a thing ennobling to him to bear than disgraceful and mean. So he rose and sat on the

groyne again, and looked upon his love, measuring its strength as we measure the strength of an antagonist, with pride as well as awe, seeing that if we conquer at all the conquest shall be no mean one.

The sun was rising large and radiant between the sea and the jagged point of the last cliff, colouring all the grey, cold line of coast; and as Christopher sat shivering under the warm, soft glow that slowly penetrated through his wet clothes, he found that his love in like manner so tinged all his memory that he could in no wise discover the exact point at which it had begun. Not that he made any great effort at doing so. Since he dared not, for a moment, take his love into the future, it was sweet, dangerously sweet, to carry it back, and let it invest the past with a beauty that never really belonged to it—to live over again every incident that had brought them together, with the emotions he would have felt had his love then existed.

As for Constance herself, he tried in vain to remember the time—and there undoubtedly had been such a time—when he had thought her plain, awkward, and secretive. Ah, now the very defects in the face that floated before him only served to individualise its beauty, to round it, and keep it utterly distinct from all other faces, and cut it deeply into his memory. How perfectly he knew it—every line, every thick, rich wave of hair slanting from the forehead! He al-

ways saw the head a little bent, as if with that secret burden which she bore, and the forehead already bore signs of hard mental conflict; but for this the sweet half-smile of patience about the mouth and chin, and the depths within depths of happy faith in the dark eyes, made all amends; and the face, whatever it might have been some five years back, when Kit could not or would not remember it, was, in the bloom of its eighteen years, exceedingly sweet and comely to look upon, and that not through Christopher's eyes alone.

Perhaps it was this quality of faith in Constance which first drew his thoughts towards her; for Kit himself, as he encountered failure after failure, had gradually exchanged faith for obstinacy; and, though obstinacy had in this case brought him success, it was not the same kind of success as that achieved by faith. Obstinacy could send him to his work at regular hours, could keep him up over his books half the night, but it could not let him aspire—it kept all his ideas narrow and confined. And when he chanced to make before Constance some deprecatory remark, half jesting, half serious, about his future, she would turn her eyes upon him for a moment with that gaze so full of faith in him, that, meeting it, his spirit was at once humiliated, yet raised. With those eyes upon him, he felt a thirst to be yet true to the dreams of his childhood—almost a belief that, under their influence, he could be; and they were good dreams, for Kit's child-

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hood had been worthy of the name — healthy, pure, and advancing as the footsteps of spring.

And thus, as I have said, gradually, almost imperceptibly, something had flowed into Kit's life, strengthening and widening its whole current, and he never knew it — no, never until now, this Sunday morning, when he sat upon the beach, watching the sea wakening in its wintry magnificence, and felt it gone, for ever gone.

And then, with a keen joy pricking through his anguish, came the assurance that, until this barrier rose up between them, a large place in that loving hidden heart was his. The barrier itself, was it so great it could not be crossed? No but, being on the side he was, his pride forbade his moving a thought towards it, so he withdrew his eyes from the great grey house to which he had lifted them, and bent his head in submission once more to the monotonous rhythm of those green, hollow waves that still repeated, in the sunshine as in the gloom, "Gone, for ever gone!"

A heart pure and faithful as the angels, strong and passionate as his own, "Gone, for ever gone!"

He heard footsteps on the beach behind him, but he could not look up — no, scarcely to save his life could Kit have looked up with that misery upon his face; so, with his head still bent, he began throwing stones at the waves, as if in one of those fits of dreamy vacancy that will so often come over us when close to

the sea, and the waves seemed to laugh mockingly as he threw at them, still repeating, "Gone, for ever gone!"

Fiercer and fiercer grew Kit's conflict with the waves.

But again there came upon his ear a sound as of stones falling lightly together under the pressure of a footstep — a footstep which a sudden quickening of his pulse told him he should surely know. The footsteps approached nearer, and the nearer they came the more intent Kit grew in his battle. What had she come for, if this were really she? — and he knew well it was no other — what had brought her here in search of him except some suspicion of his secret? He dropped the stone he was going to throw, experiencing a sudden and violent revulsion of feeling towards her. If that were so, he would soon undeceive her — he would marry Madgie to-morrow but he would undeceive her.

He rose and turned round, but somehow, though he had a superstitious dread of her setting foot in this spot, lest the very stones should reveal what he had suffered here, he could not move to meet her — he could only stand and watch her coming swiftly along in the sunshine close by the glittering sea — watch her with a vague sense of its being the first time he had ever beheld her with his own eyes open to his love, and also with a sense that was not vague, but sharp and bitter enough, of its being the last time he should ever see her thus, in her poor simple dress, which he loved because it seemed a part of herself.

The last time! Oh, little Poplar, not so swift, not quite so swift, along the shining beach!

She was up to where he stood almost before he knew it, for he had been looking at her as at a thing afar off; and now, as he saw her smiling and stretching out her hand for him to help her down from the groyne, he took it as in a dream, forgetful of all his anger and vexation at her coming.

“Oh, Christopher, I’m so glad you’ve not gone home! Do you know about us? Have you heard all about it?” she said, springing down and sitting with him on the groyne, while looking at him with a mixture of childish curiosity and a half-misgiving as to what he would think of it if he did know. “Christopher, have you heard?”

“Oh, yes,” answered Kit, attacking the waves again, to break that old, monotonous measure of their song, “Gone, for ever gone!”

“Christopher,” she said, after they had both been silent a minute, during which Kit had searched in vain in his own heart for some cause of anger against her with which to arm himself, “there is a great deal I should like to talk to you about, but now I mustn’t stay a minute scarcely. I was ill, faint, or something, last night, and it would make them anxious if they knew I had come out, so I want to get back before they know if. I was so pleased when I saw you from

the window, I was obliged to come now, because I didn't know when I might see you again; and there is something I must tell you, Christopher: it is about your father and mother. First I must beg your pardon for helping to deceive you; and, mind, I should never have told what I am going to tell if it hadn't been for this change. Christopher, it's all nonsense about Tommy having taken to kicking, and about the boy your father used to have being sick. The truth is, he's been obliged to part with them both, and a great many other things besides, to live at all. Oh, they have been pinched and pinched! and I have had to see it, and yet be unable to help them—sometimes even a burden on them. But now I can help them; and, Christopher, the first bit of pleasure and pride I have had in being rich came over me as I remembered this. At first I am afraid I was dreadfully ungrateful. I've lain awake all night nearly, feeling as though I had fallen into a strange world where I could find no corner to rest in; but this morning, as it began to get light, I remembered them, then I felt glad. While I was wondering whether you had gone home, I saw you from my window up there; and now, Christopher, if you please, I have come to ask your advice about how I am to begin."

To all this Christopher listened, feeling that weapon which he held against her—the thought that she suspected his love—grow looser and looser in his grasp

with every word, and at last slip from it altogether. He ceased throwing stones, for fear she should see the trembling of his arm. He was touched—ay, touched to the very core—by her coming to him in this way, so simply—trustingly—so unlike all the world. Any one else would have been fearful of giving offence, and gone to it in a roundabout way: here, again, was her marvellous trust.

But though, while she was speaking, Christopher could not help a wild delight in that trust penetrating his whole being, yet when she had finished, and he must answer her—like the wolf at the fountain, who was determined to find cause of anger against the lamb, or immolate her without cause—he began to view her words in quite another light. So, while he had been away, his father and mother had let her see them pinch and starve that money might be sent to him! He thanked them for that, certainly. And now she came to tell him of it, and offer to undo the mischief he had done—she, the houseless wanderer they had taken in—she, to play the patroness over them! There was beginning to rise in him a bitter antagonistic spirit he had never felt before.

“Well, Christopher, tell me,” she repeated, “how am I to begin?”

“I scarcely understand you,” he answered with a slow coldness that seemed to freeze the blood in her veins. “Were you offering to lend my father and

mother money — to give them an almshouse — or what?”

She rose from the groyne where they were sitting, and looked at him, half-terrified by his cruel tone.

“Christopher!”

“Miss Chorley!”

She burst into tears, and, moving a step or two back, said passionately —

“Christopher, how can you, how dare you, speak to me like that? You know me better — you must know me better! What have I said? They took me in a stranger; we have suffered poverty and trouble together; and now, since to one good fortune has fallen, must not all share it? Don't they deserve it more, much more, than I?”

The wolf had almost reached its last resource, and would, perhaps, have to annihilate the lamb without a cause, after all. With a short, sarcastic laugh, which went through her as coldly and cruelly as sharp steel, Christopher answered —

“Your charitable notions are confused just now; but no doubt your father and your friends will soon set them right, and show you a wiser way of disposing of your money. As for us, when we are in prison for debt, or growing burdensome on the parish, we may, perhaps, come to you for a little assistance; but, until then, I think not.”

“And this, then—this is really your answer, Christopher Vallon?”

Kit ought to be forgiven if he did take a kind of brutish pleasure in the dry, proud agony of her tone. He ought to be forgiven, for he himself, in his innermost heart, was suffering in prospect of the dreariness and desolation of the years to come. How he answered her he knew not; it seemed as if some black raven beside him croaked reply, instead of his own voice speaking.

“It is; your assistance is declined, with all thanks, of course.”

“Very well; let it be so. Good-bye, Christopher.”

Good-bye? He could not speak it; but she did not wait; he thanked God she did not wait. He heard her sharp, crisp step on the little stones, moving onwards, and he was thankful, for his hypocrisy was at an end; the raven at his side had spread its hideous wings and flown—had not even stopped to croak “Good-bye.” He was alone. Had he suffered thus, had he thus lied in spirit, for the sake of his own pride, and that alone? Not so—not so, indeed. The deathlike peace of utter misery was upon him for an instant, and it said to him, with white lips and voiceless whisper—

“Be still; thou hast done well; for thine own sake and for hers thou hast done well. Had she guessed thy love it might have cost her dear. Come, then,

take comfort in the thought; look thy last, and be at rest!”

And he clenched his hands in hard submission, and lifted up his face and looked.

The moisture in his eyes, and the sunshine together, made a golden mist between him and her, and looking through it fixedly he watched the slight, dark figure gliding, gliding away—his first love, his life’s sole hope, there in the morning sunshine, gliding, gliding away!

The Present was too small to hold his misery, and it went shivering forth, disturbing all the Future, till through that golden mist which rose between them he seemed to see slowly stalking, one by one, phantoms of the years to come. And watching, it appeared to him that all those years had really passed; that he was an old man looking back instead of forward—back upon that sunshiny morning of his youth when the sea glittered, and a thousand diamonds flashed out to the sun along the orange beach, and the rose-light crept along the grey sands—saw himself sitting there on the groyne in the vigour of his youth, watching his love moving on, and on, away from him farther and farther, yet sitting there still, dumb-stricken, powerless; and it seemed to him, moreover, that he, in his old age, was, as he looked upon the picture, moved to stretch forth his arms towards that form fleeting through the golden mist—to stretch forth his arms,

and to lift his voice with a great cry of remorse and agony —

“Constance!”

Kit hid his face in his hands, and shuddered. It was no voice of age that had escaped him, that went vibrating along the beach, but her name uttered with the full power of his lungs.

The crisp, light footfall ceased. He would almost have cut off his right hand to have been able to recall that mad cry, for the next instant his heart shook rather than beat.

They came nearer, those slow, timorous footsteps — they paused by him — there was a sound as of the slender figure dropping on its knees — a sense of a heart near him, shaken with as great a trouble as his own. But he could see nothing; his face was hidden in his hands.

The mystery of his grief was awful to her, and a prophetic thrill of the truth shot through her as she laid her hand on his wrist, and said —

“Christopher! Kit, dear Kit!”

He looked up; her face was there, close to his, looking into it. It was enough. No word, no cry, only a stretching forth and meeting of hands, finger through finger, palm crushing palm; his brown eyes, splendid with the love and hope new-risen in them, looking up into hers; and hers with all the sea tints flashing

in their dark depths, looking down into his. So they read the love of each other's heart.

That breaking of the waves, which a minute ago had fallen on his ear like a dirge, now seemed to have become the very pulse of their dumb bliss—bliss all the more intense because they dared not let it look forward—because it must all be condensed into those few, brief, full moments.

And the sun shone, and the sea glittered beneath it, and those moments ebbed away. Kit felt the last one in which they had to be together was come, and he let his face fall on the hem of her black dress, gripping her hands tighter and tighter.

As for Constance, she could feel no anguish even in parting; the joy that had risen in her heart seemed strong and enduring as the morning sun, and threw a golden pathway over the troubled waters of her life. Like this sun, truly, it might set—might be obscured by nights of stormy darkness, or by nights thick-set, as though with stars, with keen, bright-pointed spears of wholesome pain. All this might be, yet, assuredly, it would rise again and again, renewed in beauty and freshness every time, until it rose into that sky where it could never wane. So there was no sadness in her voice, only tremulous happiness, as she laid her hand on the rich chestnut hair, with something of a mother's pride in its beauty, and said—

“Come, Christopher, I must go.”

He looked up, and, meeting her smile, sunnier and more exquisite than the gleam of primroses or daffodils, he could not forbear smiling also, or being stirred like her with a sense of the immortality of love.

They rose and stood holding each other's hands, and Kit felt his anguish and doubt coming on him again.

"Give me something, Constance—something to take home with me to look at, and remember it's all true."

"Certainly we must give each other something; but look, here is my pocket empty. I must buy you something as splendid as can be got for money, and send it to you."

"No, no; I will have none of that," said Kit almost angrily; "I want something that belongs to you now, not bought with that money."

"Well, then, take this," she said, laughing, and pulling off a little crape rosette from the body of her dress; "and remember, whenever you look at it, that I have sworn by the hand that made it—which was your mother's—to be true to you while a shred of it lasts. And now what have you for me? Something better than that, I hope."

"Nothing that you will care for as I shall for this little fool of a bow, but something, none the less, which has cost me an awful lot of money; and which, if I don't see round your neck every time I meet you in your carriage here, while I am sneaking past about

my business, I shall request the loan of to strangle myself with. There it is. I meant to have given it to you with the other presents last night."

She held a glittering chain of gold in the sun.

"Not care for it, Christopher? Why, it is magnificent! Well, it may be hard for me to manage, perhaps, but I don't care; I promise you solemnly you shall never see me without it."

"That's enough. Good-bye!" said Kit, turning away, and throwing himself down on the beach.

"Good-bye," she said, stooping and giving him her hands. "Good-bye, my friend — my next to God!"

He pressed them to his eyes and lips, then threw them from him, saying hoarsely —

"Good-bye. Go, Constance, go!"

She turned away and ran up the beach, hiding the chain in her dress.

CHAPTER XIV.

KIT'S STONY HILLS.

THE snow had been falling thinly, and the greyhound weather vane had set its tail persistently against the north, from which, all day, blew a fine profitable wind — a wind that wafted every stray passenger along the Iversham road, on horse or on foot, under the creaking signboard of "The Waggoner's Rest."

But though, owing to this fact, and the landlord's good temper in consequence, the kitchen looks more inviting than usual this evening, it is not here we must stay. Let us look in with Mrs. Standish upon the fine old gentleman who paces up and down the dark little best parlour, waiting for 'Duke's return from school under the care of Kit as the Vallon representative. Everybody in the house comes to peep at him, as the father of the two little outcasts found by Jemmy on that memorable April morning in the sackroom. His daughter has come with him, and sits in the dark window, thinking of many things.

It was about four of the cuckoo clock in the bar—just when the pacings up and down in the best parlour were heard to get restless—that Kit came quietly into the kitchen—quietly, but not alone. The old gentleman heard—pushed past Mrs. Standish in the passage—and received his boy, flushed and trembling, in his arms.

Humphrey Standish and his wife had argued great things for Kit, from the old gentleman's expressions of boundless gratitude to the Vallons for their kindness to the children. Madgie, too, as she sat trimming her Christmas cap, near the till, ready to take money from her father, and give change, closed her pretty eyes, more than once, over a picture that was very pleasant to look at; a group, in the best parlour, of herself and Kit; and that kind silvery-haired old

gentleman, joining their hands, and settling upon them a handsome annuity for life.

Such dreams, however, did not seem to be at all in the way of realisation that night. No sooner did Daniel Chorley hold his boy safe and sound in his arms, than his feelings regarding Kit experienced a complete reaction. After all, he reasoned with himself, this young man had shown a very unnecessary officiousness about the whole matter, which looked rather like a wish to lay him, Mr. Chorley, under personal obligations to himself; and this, after certain suspicions Constance's way of mentioning Kit had awakened in him, was not to be endured for a moment. Therefore, though his gratitude had, in a great measure, vanished, when he sent for Kit into the parlour, he determined to reward him handsomely, and to have done with him, and all his daughter's low connections, at once and for ever.

When Kit, without appearing to be either surprised or insulted, quietly declined taking the three bank-notes held out to him, the old gentleman fixed upon his face a suspicious and offended glance.

"Yes, yes, young sir," he said, in a tone of offended dignity that Humphrey Standish, who was listening at the door, thought very fine indeed, in reproof of his nephew's careless, independent sort of manner; "yes, yes, young sir, this is all very well; but allow

me to remind you it is not right to me, this unbusiness-like behaviour."

"Not right to you?" asked Christopher, lifting his eyebrows with affected surprise.

"Because, by refusing what is due to you for this service you have rendered me, you necessitate my remaining under an obligation to you."

"Yes; that is true, certainly, but can't be helped, sir," said Kit, shaking his head. "But still, Mr. Chorley, if at any time I should know of a way in which you could help me, I promise I will give you a chance of removing your obligation (as you will call it so) by making you acquainted with it. Good evening, sir. Miss Chorley, good-bye."

"Well, certainly," remarked Mr. Chorley, as the door closed upon Kit, "that is the most presuming, absurd young man it has been my fate to meet. Come, 'Duke, my boy, let us be going."

"And would they part like this?" Kit asked himself, when he was alone.

The moonlight streamed in clearly at both ends of the red brick passage; by the door of the garden, where he had pulled radishes with Madgie that April morning under the apple-trees, and by the front door with the square table box tree on each side. It was against one of these that Kit leant; and before his feet, on the close, thick grass, lay the shadows of the low railings. On the road without all was very silent,

so silent that he could hear the cows munching in the fields opposite, the same slanting fields he had walked up with *her* from the river side long, long ago.

But neither the silence nor the moonlight, pouring upon him through the gaunt bare chestnut boughs, like a smile of peace, stilled the bitter and contemptuous feelings that were beginning to surge and swell in Kit's breast. It seemed to him that had Constance's father been a sultan or prince, the distance between them would have been less than it was now, with this intense dislike which he found already rankling in him against Daniel Chorley, and which he had just seen was heartily returned. It had ~~been~~ been a hard struggle to keep his voice even and unconcerned, and his words respectful, in that brief intercourse which had just passed; and to which he had gone expecting, at least, the outstretched hand of common gratitude.

Had such a hand been held out to him, Kit, in spite of a vague, instinctive aversion of many years' standing, would have taken it with right good-will; both because it was *her* father's, and because he had a real desire to grasp it, as the hand that might give or withhold his life's happiness. Not that Kit, however things might have turned, meant to accept that happiness without first earning it, by the attainment of a position in the world, that it would be an honour to ask her to share with him. And, between the day he could do that and now, there lay, oh, how long

a space of sickening doubt, and effort,— sometimes to be rewarded, but more often vain; of hope, and disappointment; of faith; and faith such as his, with its strong, but fitful pulse, is not altogether a thornless flower to wear at one's heart; all this Kit had seen in the distance that Sunday morning, as he journeyed along the beach on the day of his betrothal. But as the great light about him had made the sea and beach appear boundless, and the houses of the town small and far off, in like manner had the glow of new first love in his soul left in dim indistinctness all that lay beyond the present. Later, when that love could no longer live on remembrances only, but began to pine for hope, he had looked forward, and seen all this more clearly. It was hard; yet, how could he complain? how do otherwise than accept it, uncomplainingly? As for work; he thought upon his strength, and smiled! As for waiting; how old were they? Eighteen and twenty-three, What was waiting, what were years, to them? What manner of man could he be, that would cry out at Fate, if he might look up, after a year's toiling for the woman he loved, and find her but nineteen, and then, were his task not finished, might toil for yet another year, and another, and another and find her still waiting for him, in the glory of her womanhood?

And well considering these things in his heart, Kit had prepared joyfully, fearfully, to climb the rough,

stony hills, that lay between him and his life's fair promise.

How he had sped, his look and attitude, as he leant heavily against the box-tree in the moonlight, this Christmas Eve, showed plainly enough.

It was not only that he had found the stones so cruelly sharp this day, in the waiting to see her depart from him, for neither knew how long and weary a time, without a word or look of leave-taking—without that silent, strength-giving farewell of friends who depart separately, on long perilous journeys—that silent farewell, in which the sting of parting is half crushed out in the mute, trembling, breathless pressure of heart against heart, lip against lip. O yes! these stones of Kit's were sharp; they bruised and hurt him sore; yet it was not their sharpness that drove him back. It was, rather, the thought that all his labour for years to come must, to attain his end, be ruled so as to please a man whom he despised from his innermost heart; a man of whom he knew no one good thing. It was this that hung about the stones like a loathsome slime, and made his feet slip and fail on them; and, once beginning to doubt and recoil, everything he had stood upon as being immovable seemed to totter and fail him. He doubted himself, he doubted her, doubted whether he had not acted selfishly and rashly, thus to burden her life with a tie that must bring her so much pain, and secret un-

easiness, and weary waiting. Would her trust in him, and her love, outlive that waiting? A something—perhaps the spirit of that love and trust he doubted—made him answer, in a still, small voice, full of pained tenderness—

“It will, and thou knowest it—it will outlive all things, all time!” But Kit, in his blind and savage fit of doubt, giving his own heart the lie, cried, “I know better—it is impossible—I was a fool even to have thought of it—a fool and a selfish brute!”

Thus poor Kit, as he lay groaning in spirit at the base of those stony hills of his, wanted to persuade himself it was better to set his foot upon them no more, to give up all the fair promise that was beyond them, and use all his strength in forgetting it. If it be thought that, in all this, he was weak and wavering, let it be remembered of what his life had been up to the last five years—how painless—how unclouded—and how free; and now was it to be wondered at that he had great impatience and fear at this solitary, unfed, craving guest; this slow tearing away of self, and consecration of all thoughts and feelings to another?

“Was she too suffering?” he wondered. “Would she be glad of a word from him—as she passed from the door to the carriage—to free her?”

His anguish and restlessness, once settling into that thought, made it press upon him harder and harder. It had come to him, at the sight of the carriage which

Jemmy had just driven round. In another minute, Mr. Chorley, with 'Duke, wrapped up in furs, by his side, came out. The look with which he regarded Kit's lounging attitude against the box-tree was returned to him, with double contempt, by a pair of brown haughty eyes, the like of whose fierceness he had never seen in eyes before. Yes, poor Kit could look out all his contempt now, for his mind was made up, and he only waited for the appearance of a certain form in the doorway to say the word which should make all this strange sadness of his life but as a dream.

But she did not come; second after second passed, and yet she did not come.

Daniel Chorley was still engrossed in wrapping 'Duke up in the carriage. Very likely he had told her not to come, until he went for her; and how was Kit to speak then? He lifted himself up from the crackling box, and went in-doors.

You would have thought it a drunken man, feeling his way in the moonlight along the narrow passage, his steps were so heavy and uneven, and he seemed to be battling with something in the air with his arms, some spirit that pushed him back tenderly, lovingly, but which he still fought and pressed on against.

He got to the parlour-door, and saw a figure sitting by a red dull fire. Feeling his way in the dark — between the table and chairs — he stood presently on the hearth-rug, griping the mantel-piece with his shaking

with every word, and at last slip from it altogether. He ceased throwing stones, for fear she should see the trembling of his arm. He was touched—ay, touched to the very core—by her coming to him in this way, so simply—trustingly—so unlike all the world. Any one else would have been fearful of giving offence, and gone to it in a roundabout way: here, again, was her marvellous trust.

But though, while she was speaking, Christopher could not help a wild delight in that trust penetrating his whole being, yet when she had finished, and he must answer her—like the wolf at the fountain, who was determined to find cause of anger against the lamb, or immolate her without cause—he began to view her words in quite another light. So, while he had been away, his father and mother had let her see them pinch and starve that money might be sent to him! He thanked them for that, certainly. And now she came to tell him of it, and offer to undo the mischief he had done—she, the houseless wanderer they had taken in—she, to play the patroness over them! There was beginning to rise in him a bitter antagonistic spirit he had never felt before.

“Well, Christopher, tell me,” she repeated, “how am I to begin?”

“I scarcely understand you,” he answered with a slow coldness that seemed to freeze the blood in her veins. “Were you offering to lend my father and

mother money — to give them an almshouse — or what?"

She rose from the groyne where they were sitting, and looked at him, half-terrified by his cruel tone.

"Christopher!"

"Miss Chorley!"

She burst into tears, and, moving a step or two back, said passionately —

"Christopher, how can you, how dare you, speak to me like that? You know me better — you must know me better! What have I said? They took me in a stranger; we have suffered poverty and trouble together; and now, since to one good fortune has fallen, must not all share it? Don't they deserve it more, much more, than I?"

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“Very well; let it be so. Good-bye, Christopher.”

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And he clenched his hands in hard submission, and lifted up his face and looked.

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He looked up, and, meeting her smile, sunnier and more exquisite than the gleam of primroses or daffodils, he could not forbear smiling also, or being stirred like her with a sense of the immortality of love.

They rose and stood holding each other's hands, and Kit felt his anguish and doubt coming on him again.

"Give me something, Constance—something to take home with me to look at, and remember it's all true."

"Certainly we must give each other something; but look, here is my pocket empty. I must buy you something as splendid as can be got for money, and send it to you."

"No, no; I will have none of that," said Kit almost angrily; "I want something that belongs to you now, not bought with that money."

"Well, then, take this," she said, laughing, and pulling off a little crape rosette from the body of her dress; "and remember, whenever you look at it, that I have sworn by the hand that made it—which was your mother's—to be true to you while a shred of it lasts. And now what have you for me? Something better than that, I hope."

"Nothing that you will care for as I shall for this little fool of a bow, but something, none the less, which has cost me an awful lot of money; and which, if I don't see round your neck every time I meet you in your carriage here, while I am sneaking past about

my business, I shall request the loan of to strangle myself with. There it is. I meant to have given it to you with the other presents last night."

She held a glittering chain of gold in the sun.

"Not care for it, Christopher? Why, it is magnificent! Well, it may be hard for me to manage, perhaps, but I don't care; I promise you solemnly you shall never see me without it."

"That's enough. Good-bye!" said Kit, turning away, and throwing himself down on the beach.

"Good-bye," she said, stooping and giving him her hands. "Good-bye, my friend — my next to God!"

He pressed them to his eyes and lips, then threw them from him, saying hoarsely —

"Good-bye. Go, Constance, go!"

She turned away and ran up the beach, hiding the chain in her dress.

CHAPTER XIV.

KIT'S STONY HILLS.

THE snow had been falling thinly, and the greyhound weather vane had set its tail persistently against the north, from which, all day, blew a fine profitable wind — a wind that wafted every stray passenger along the Iversham road, on horse or on foot, under the creaking signboard of "The Waggoner's Rest."

But though, owing to this fact, and the landlord's good temper in consequence, the kitchen looks more inviting than usual this evening, it is not here we must stay. Let us look in with Mrs. Standish upon the fine old gentleman who paces up and down the dark little best parlour, waiting for 'Duke's return from school under the care of Kit as the Vallon representative. Everybody in the house comes to peep at him, as the father of the two little outcasts found by Jemmy on that memorable April morning in the sackroom. His daughter has come with him, and sits in the dark window, thinking of many things.

It was about four of the cuckoo clock in the bar—just when the pacings up and down in the best parlour were heard to get restless—that Kit came quietly into the kitchen—quietly, but not alone. The old gentleman heard—pushed past Mrs. Standish in the passage—and received his boy, flushed and trembling, in his arms.

Humphrey Standish and his wife had argued great things for Kit, from the old gentleman's expressions of boundless gratitude to the Vallons for their kindness to the children. Madgie, too, as she sat trimming her Christmas cap, near the till, ready to take money from her father, and give change, closed her pretty eyes, more than once, over a picture that was very pleasant to look at; a group, in the best parlour, of herself and Kit; and that kind silvery-haired old

gentleman, joining their hands, and settling upon them a handsome annuity for life.

Such dreams, however, did not seem to be at all in the way of realisation that night. No sooner did Daniel Chorley hold his boy safe and sound in his arms, than his feelings regarding Kit experienced a complete reaction. After all, he reasoned with himself, this young man had shown a very unnecessary officiousness about the whole matter, which looked rather like a wish to lay him, Mr. Chorley, under personal obligations to himself; and this, after certain suspicions Constance's way of mentioning Kit had awakened in him, was not to be endured for a moment. Therefore, though his gratitude had, in a great measure, vanished, when he sent for Kit into the parlour, he determined to reward him handsomely, and to have done with him, and all his daughter's low connections, at once and for ever.

When Kit, without appearing to be either surprised or insulted, quietly declined taking the three bank-notes held out to him, the old gentleman fixed upon his face a suspicious and offended glance.

"Yes, yes, young sir," he said, in a tone of offended dignity that Humphrey Standish, who was listening at the door, thought very fine indeed, in reproof of his nephew's careless, independent sort of manner; "yes, yes, young sir, this is all very well; but allow

me to remind you it is not right to me, this unbusiness-like behaviour."

"Not right to you?" asked Christopher, lifting his eyebrows with affected surprise.

"Because, by refusing what is due to you for this service you have rendered me, you necessitate my remaining under an obligation to you."

"Yes; that is true, certainly, but can't be helped, sir," said Kit, shaking his head. "But still, Mr. Chorley, if at any time I should know of a way in which you could help me, I promise I will give you a chance of removing your obligation (as you will call it so) by making you acquainted with it. Good evening, sir. Miss Chorley, good-bye."

"Well, certainly," remarked Mr. Chorley, as the door closed upon Kit, "that is the most presuming, absurd young man it has been my fate to meet. Come, 'Duke, my boy, let us be going."

"And would they part like this?" Kit asked himself, when he was alone.

The moonlight streamed in clearly at both ends of the red brick passage; by the door of the garden, where he had pulled radishes with Madgie that April morning under the apple-trees, and by the front door with the square table box tree on each side. It was against one of these that Kit leant; and before his feet, on the close, thick grass, lay the shadows of the low railings. On the road without all was very silent,

so vile that he could hear the cows munching in the fields opposite, the same slanting fields he had walked up with *her* from the river side long, long ago.

But neither the silence nor the moonlight, pouring upon him through the gaunt bare chestnut boughs, like a smile of peace, stilled the bitter and contemptuous feelings that were beginning to surge and swell in Kit's breast. It seemed to him that had Constance's father been a sultan or prince, the distance between them would have been less than it was now, with this intense dislike which he found already rankling in him against Daniel Chorley, and which he had just seen was heartily returned. It had ~~been~~ a hard struggle to keep his voice even and unconcerned, and his words respectful, in that brief intercourse which had just passed; and to which he had gone expecting, at least, the outstretched hand of common gratitude.

Had such a hand been held out to him, Kit, in spite of a vague, instinctive aversion of many years' standing, would have taken it with right good-will; both because it was *her* father's, and because he had a real desire to grasp it, as the hand that might give or withhold his life's happiness. Not that Kit, however things might have turned, meant to accept that happiness without first earning it, by the attainment of a position in the world, that it would be an honour to ask her to share with him. And, between the day he could do that and now, there lay, oh, how long

a space of sickening doubt, and effort,— sometimes to be rewarded, but more often vain; of hope, and disappointment; of faith; and faith such as his, with its strong, but fitful pulse, is not altogether a thornless flower to wear at one's heart; all this Kit had seen in the distance that Sunday morning, as he journeyed along the beach on the day of his betrothal. But as the great light about him had made the sea and beach appear boundless, and the houses of the town small and far off, in like manner had the glow of new first love in his soul left in dim indistinctness all that lay beyond the present. Later, when that love could no longer live on remembrances only, but began to pine for hope, he had looked forward, and seen all this more clearly. It was hard; yet, how could he complain? how do otherwise than accept it, uncomplainingly? As for work; he thought upon his strength, and smiled! As for waiting; how old were they? Eighteen and twenty-three, What was waiting, what were years, to them? What manner of man could he be, that would cry out at Fate, if he might look up, after a year's toiling for the woman he loved, and find her but nineteen, and then, were his task not finished, might toil for yet another year, and another, and another and find her still waiting for him, in the glory of her womanhood?

And well considering these things in his heart, Kit had prepared joyfully, fearfully, to climb the rough,

stony hills, that lay between him and his life's fair promise.

How he had sped, his look and attitude, as he leant heavily against the box-tree in the moonlight, this Christmas Eve, showed plainly enough.

It was not only that he had found the stones so cruelly sharp this day, in the waiting to see her depart from him, for neither knew how long and weary a time, without a word or look of leave-taking—without that silent, strength-giving farewell of friends who depart separately, on long perilous journeys—that silent farewell, in which the sting of parting is half crushed out in the mute, trembling, breathless pressure of heart against heart, lip against lip. O yes! these stones of Kit's were sharp; they bruised and hurt him sore; yet it was not their sharpness that drove him back. It was, rather, the thought that all his labour for years to come must, to attain his end, be ruled so as to please a man whom he despised from his innermost heart; a man of whom he knew no one good thing. It was this that hung about the stones like a loathsome slime, and made his feet slip and fail on them; and, once beginning to doubt and recoil, everything he had stood upon as being immovable seemed to totter and fail him. He doubted himself, he doubted her, doubted whether he had not acted selfishly and rashly, thus to burden her life with a tie that must bring her so much pain, and secret un-

easiness, and weary waiting. Would her trust in him, and her love, outlive that waiting? A something—perhaps the spirit of that love and trust he doubted—made him answer, in a still, small voice, full of pained tenderness—

“It will, and thou knowest it—it will outlive all things, all time!” But Kit, in his blind and savage fit of doubt, giving his own heart the lie, cried, “I know better—it is impossible—I was a fool even to have thought of it—a fool and a selfish brute!”

Thus poor Kit, as he lay groaning in spirit at the base of those stony hills of his, wanted to persuade himself it was better to set his foot upon them no more, to give up all the fair promise that was beyond them, and use all his strength in forgetting it. If it be thought that, in all this, he was weak and wavering, let it be remembered of what his life had been up to the last five years—how painless—how unclouded—and how free; and now was it to be wondered at that he had great impatience and fear at this solitary, unfed, craving guest; this slow tearing away of self, and consecration of all thoughts and feelings to another?

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Jemmy had just driven round. In another minute, Mr. Chorley, with 'Duke, wrapped up in furs, by his side, came out. The look with which he regarded Kit's lounging attitude against the box-tree was returned to him, with double contempt, by a pair of brown haughty eyes, the like of whose fierceness he had never seen in eyes before. Yes, poor Kit could look out all his contempt now, for his mind was made up, and he only waited for the appearance of a certain form in the doorway to say the word which should make all this strange sadness of his life but as a dream.

'But she did not come'; second after second passed, and yet she did not come.

Daniel Chorley was still engrossed in wrapping 'Duke up in the carriage. Very likely he had told her not to come, until he went for her; and how was Kit to speak then? He lifted himself up from the crackling box, and went in-doors.

You would have thought it a drunken man, feeling his way in the moonlight along the narrow passage, his steps were so heavy and uneven, and he seemed to be battling with something in the air with his arms, some spirit that pushed him back tenderly, lovingly, but which he still fought and pressed on against.

He got to the parlour-door, and saw a figure sitting by a red dull fire. Feeling his way in the dark — between the table and chairs — he stood presently on the hearth-rug, griping the mantel-piece with his shaking

hand, till the yellow tissue-paper round the looking-glass frame shivered audibly.

She watched him in silence and half-terror, for he seemed to have risen up before her like a ghost. She scarcely dared to speak, or let him speak, feeling that her father would be standing at the door in a second. Kit felt it, too, and dared not be silent — no, not for an instant, though this little picture of her which the dull red firelight gave him, as it hovered about her head and sweet, sweet, fearful face, scarcely less pure-looking than the white rose resting on the waves of her dark hair inside her bonnet — though this picture of her was the one which would be with him for evermore, he dared not pause to stamp itself on his heart distinctly, but must content himself with bearing it away, all imperfect and shadowy as it was — must speak and part at once.

He bent down, taking her hands and wringing them, and then let them drop without a word, still bending over her. She could not understand his manner; his strong, hard-set face, his eyes bloodshot, as if some great strain were behind them. He woke in her a wild fear that made her forget all about her father.

“Constance!” She did not know the voice as his; and a sudden horror went through her of his finishing the sentence; so when he had only said “Constance!” she stood up, and pushed him off with both her hands, crying, in a low, beseeching voice — “Christopher! O my love, my love! what is it?”

And it came to pass that he did *not* speak the words he had come on purpose to utter. He drew her to him, and folded her to his heart, and took her into it and into his soul as he had never done before, to be one love through all existence, to be his wife “for better for worse, for richer for poorer.” And therewith tears, and low, passionate vows to God, did he plight her his troth.

Steps came, they parted hurriedly, groping their way on either side the table—Constance to meet her father at the door, Kit to find a little grimy horsehair sofa in the corner, and to fling himself upon it face downwards.

CHAPTER XV.

THROUGH FALLING LEAVES.

“EPPIE, woman,” said the wheelwright, pausing in his work one gorgeous autumnal afternoon, and letting the brown and yellow leaves fly back over the path he had just swept. “Eppie, woman, how long is it since Kit and her were here before; together, I mean.”

Eppie, who was picking a bit of parsley, answered, without looking up—

“Five years, come Christmas, we all stood at the door waiting for Kit, and you says, ‘set a light in the winder, father;’ and he says ‘Jack, I can’t find

it,' he says. Oh, dear, dear, it seems as if it was but yesterday."

While Eppie lifted her apron to her eyes, and tugged at everything in the variegated border except parsley, the wheelwright turned towards a window, over which a white, thick blind was drawn, and fixed on it a gaze of mingled grief, reverence, and tenderness.

"I don't know, Eppie," he said, in a husky voice, glancing at the bright holiday aspect of all the other windows, "I don't know that it's the thing at all."

"What?" asked Mrs. Vallon.

"This visiting and love-making in the house just now; it goes again me more'n I thought it would. I wish she 'ud a kept away a bit longer."

Eppie straightened herself, and looked round at him.

"Father, father, you wouldn't begrudge the poor things just this hour o' pleasure. It's little enough they've had this five year. Of course, it goes again me to do the house up while *he* lies there; but I should like to see — poor dear — the lad's face without that old, old careful look, if it was only for a few minutes."

"Well, well," answered the wheelwright, fetching back the truant leaves with his broom, "I wouldn't ha' planned it so; but as we haven't got time to put her off, and as things seemed to have planned themselves, let it be; we won't tell Kit about it till she's gone."

Eppie carried her apron of parsley into the house, apparently content; but while she stood at the window nipping and washing little bits to set round some dainty dish for tea, she threw very uneasy glances towards her good man, for she could by no means understand the taciturn humour that had been upon him since he returned from his morning's journey to Todness. Constance's little note, saying that she was at last going to pay them a hasty visit, he had seen on the previous evening; and he had appeared as well pleased as, in his state of mind, he could be. It had been his own idea that Christopher should not be told of a certain trouble which had befallen them until she had gone, and that nothing should interfere with their pleasure, the few hours they would be together, that it was possible to avert. Eppie was not a little concerned, therefore, when on his return this morning the wheelwright showed unmistakeable signs of dissatisfaction at all the loving little preparations she had made for the young people; and wished they were not coming; that the day was over: and said many other inhospitable things, which she could not at all understand from him.

While she was still nipping her heads of parsley, and watching him uneasily, he came to the window with his hammer, to nail up a long rose-tree branch which had trailed to the ground, and lay with its bunches of small pale roses on the dead leaves.

“You’re not so well again, father? You didn’t get bad news in the town this morning?” Eppie said, as she saw him let the bough fall several times before he could drive the nail in.

The wheelwright, however, without answering, continued to puff, and blow, and hammer, until the rusty nail had taken hold; then he stood leaning his elbows on the window ledge, watching her busy wrinkled fingers as she took the parsley out of the water.

“What do you say, old woman?” he began presently. “Will this really come to anything between Kit and her?”

“Come to anything! why, what *are* you talking of, father? God A’mighty grant it may! The poor lad’s had no thought but her this five year come Christmas.”

“Does Christopher tell you this? He never speaks to me about it.”

“Why no,” said Eppie, “a father’s one thing, and a mother’s another; though I don’t know that he’s *said* much to me, but he can’t blind his mother’s eyes, bless him!”

“But, Eppie,” said the wheelwright, and so earnestly that he made the wrinkled hands quite tremble; “for God’s sake don’t keep anything from me now; do you know if the lad’s going to make any move yet about her? but surely he isn’t yet?”

“And why not?” demanded Eppie. “My goodness me, father, why nobody ’ud think as you ’ud lived to

see your son's name in the half-a-dozen papers he brought home last year, and which, please God, I'll keep by me so long as I'm spared; nobody 'ud think you had lived to see his name set up in print, like that, and to see him a gentleman, with a gentleman's ways and all — that they wouldn't, to hear you talk! Why shouldn't he go in to old Chorley with the best of them, and ask for his daughter, if he wants his daughter? She's a good sort of lass, but she's no more than other people's daughters to ask for, that I know on. But you're out o' sorts, father, and no wonder!"

"Eppie, tell me at once — I must know, when is Christopher going to speak to Chorley?"

She was quite frightened, for he had caught her sleeve, and was waiting for her answer with a face full of keen wistful anxiety.

"Father!" she exclaimed.

"Eppie, tell me."

"But it's a secret between me and Kit. I've known it ever so long, and kep' it for him. A lad can't tell his father everything."

"Eppie, tell me."

"Well then, yes, he is going to speak to her father; and why not? It's been all planned a long time since, and they're going to speak to the old gentleman when he comes back from London; and they're coming here to-day to settle between themselves and all of us about

the time and all, and if you'd a waited you'd ef heard why. Why there he is, father; there is Kit. Make haste and undo the gate. Don't let him come in here till I've got my cap on."

"God help him!" said the wheelwright, lifting himself heavily from the window-ledge. "Poor lad! poor lad!"

The old black door having been left open, Kit and his companion had already entered the yard, and were stooping to acknowledge the vehement welcome of Merrylegs.

The wheelwright watched them as they came slowly up the path under the little trees which arched over their heads, and made pictures of them as they came along.

They had come by boat from Todness to Fairleigh, and Kit was looking a little tired and flushed, but so well and handsome, his father thought, in his light rowing dress, and so happy, that the sight of his face almost made him raise his finger and point to that closed white window at the corner of the house. But he refrained from doing so, and continued watching them silently as they came towards him. *She*, too, was looking very pretty, he could but own—more girlish and sweet, because happier, than ever he had seen her.

She reminded him, in her dress of pale pink muslin, and brown shawl and hat, of the faint autumn roses

he had just been nailing against the rich leaves of the Virginia creeper; and as she drew near, the same kind of shrinking came over him that he had felt when he had bruised and crushed one of them with his clumsy hammer.

But she was close to him now, holding out her little hand with a timid yearning smile. He just touched it, and let it go, saying gruffly —

“Quite well, I thank you,” though she had made no inquiry about his health, and then turned to Christopher.

“Kit,” he said, “if Miss Chorley ’ud be so good as to sit down in the parlour till your mother’s ready, I want to have a bit o’ talk with you before tea.”

“O pray, do not mind me, Uncle Vallon!” said Constance; “I’m not quite such a stranger here as to sit down in state and be waited upon. You can be as long as ever you like, Kit: I shall go and find your grandfather.”

The wheelwright caught her arm, almost roughly, as she was turning away.

“Don’t go to that side of the house, please; don’t go near his room at all. We’re all obliged to be quiet now; he’s took to his bed. I think she’d better sit in the parlour, Kit, if you please.”

“Certainly I will do so, if you wish it,” answered Constance, while a look of surprise passed between her and Kit. “I’m sorry to hear about grandfather.”

me to remind you it is not right to me, this unbusiness-like behaviour."

"Not right to you?" asked Christopher, lifting his eyebrows with affected surprise.

"Because, by refusing what is due to you for this service you have rendered me, you necessitate my remaining under an obligation to you."

"Yes; that is true, certainly, but can't be helped, sir," said Kit, shaking his head. "But still, Mr. Chorley, if at any time I should know of a way in which you could help me, I promise I will give you a chance of removing your obligation (as you will call it so) by making you acquainted with it. Good evening, sir. Miss Chorley, good-bye."

"Well, certainly," remarked Mr. Chorley, as the door closed upon Kit, "that is the most presuming, absurd young man it has been my fate to meet. Come, 'Duke, my boy, let us be going."

"And would they part like this?" Kit asked himself, when he was alone.

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He got to the parlour-door, and saw a figure sitting by a red dull fire. Feeling his way in the dark — between the table and chairs — he stood presently on the hearth-rug, griping the mantel-piece with his shaking

hand, till the yellow tissue-paper round the looking-glass frame shivered audibly.

She watched him in silence and half-terror, for he seemed to have risen up before her like a ghost. She scarcely dared to speak, or let him speak, feeling that her father would be standing at the door in a second. Kit felt it, too, and dared not be silent — no, not for an instant, though this little picture of her which the dull red firelight gave him, as it hovered about her head and sweet, sweet, fearful face, scarcely less pure-looking than the white rose resting on the waves of her dark hair inside her bonnet — though this picture of her was the one which would be with him for evermore, he dared not pause to stamp itself on his heart distinctly, but must content himself with bearing it away, all imperfect and shadowy as it was — must speak and part at once.

He bent down, taking her hands and wringing them, and then let them drop without a word, still bending over her. She could not understand his manner; his strong, hard-set face, his eyes bloodshot, as if some great strain were behind them. He woke in her a wild fear that made her forget all about her father.

“Constance!” She did not know the voice as his; and a sudden horror went through her of his finishing the sentence; so when he had only said “Constance!” she stood up, and pushed him off with both her hands, crying, in a low, beseeching voice — “Christopher! O my love, my love! what is it?”

And it came to pass that he did *not* speak the words he had come on purpose to utter. He drew her to him, and folded her to his heart, and took her into it and into his soul as he had never done before, to be one love through all existence, to be his wife “for better for worse, for richer for poorer.” And thereto with tears, and low, passionate vows to God, did he plight her his troth.

Steps came, they parted hurriedly, groping their way on either side the table—Constance to meet her father at the door, Kit to find a little grimy horsehair sofa in the corner, and to fling himself upon it face downwards.

CHAPTER XV.

THROUGH FALLING LEAVES.

“EPPIE, woman,” said the wheelwright, pausing in his work one gorgeous autumnal afternoon, and letting the brown and yellow leaves fly back over the path he had just swept. “Eppie, woman, how long is it since Kit and her were here before; together, I mean.”

Eppie, who was picking a bit of parsley, answered, without looking up—

“Five years, come Christmas, we all stood at the door waiting for Kit, and you says, ‘set a light in the winder, father;’ and he says ‘Jack, I can’t find

it,' he says. Oh, dear, dear, it seems as if it was but yesterday."

While Eppie lifted her apron to her eyes, and tugged at everything in the variegated border except parsley, the wheelwright turned towards a window, over which a white, thick blind was drawn, and fixed on it a gaze of mingled grief, reverence, and tenderness.

"I don't know, Eppie," he said, in a husky voice, glancing at the bright holiday aspect of all the other windows, "I don't know that it's the thing at all."

"What?" asked Mrs. Vallon.

"This visiting and love-making in the house just now; it goes again me more'n I thought it would. I wish she 'ud a kept away a bit longer."

Eppie straightened herself, and looked round at him.

"Father, father, you wouldn't begrudge the poor things just this hour o' pleasure. It's little enough they've had this five year. Of course, it goes again me to do the house up while *he* lies there; but I should like to see — poor dear — the lad's face without that old, old careful look, if it was only for a few minutes."

"Well, well," answered the wheelwright, fetching back the truant leaves with his broom, "I wouldn't ha' planned it so; but as we haven't got time to put her off, and as things seemed to have planned themselves, let it be; we won't tell Kit about it till she's gone."

Eppie carried her apron of parsley into the house, apparently content; but while she stood at the window nipping and washing little bits to set round some dainty dish for tea, she threw very uneasy glances towards her good man, for she could by no means understand the taciturn humour that had been upon him since he returned from his morning's journey to Todness. Constance's little note, saying that she was at last going to pay them a hasty visit, he had seen on the previous evening; and he had appeared as well pleased as, in his state of mind, he could be. It had been his own idea that Christopher should not be told of a certain trouble which had befallen them until she had gone, and that nothing should interfere with their pleasure, the few hours they would be together, that it was possible to avert. Eppie was not a little concerned, therefore, when on his return this morning the wheelwright showed unmistakeable signs of dissatisfaction at all the loving little preparations she had made for the young people; and wished they were not coming; that the day was over: and said many other inhospitable things, which she could not at all understand from him.

While she was still nipping her heads of parsley, and watching him uneasily, he came to the window with his hammer, to nail up a long rose-tree branch which had trailed to the ground, and lay with its bunches of small pale roses on the dead leaves.

“You’re not so well again, father? You didn’t get bad news in the town this morning?” Eppie said, as she saw him let the bough fall several times before he could drive the nail in.

The wheelwright, however, without answering, continued to puff, and blow, and hammer, until the rusty nail had taken hold; then he stood leaning his elbows on the window ledge, watching her busy wrinkled fingers as she took the parsley out of the water.

“What do you say, old woman?” he began presently. “Will this really come to anything between Kit and her?”

“Come to anything! why, what *are* you talking of, father? God A’mighty grant it may! The poor lad’s had no thought but her this five year come Christmas.”

“Does Christopher tell you this? He never speaks to me about it.”

“Why no,” said Eppie, “a father’s one thing, and a mother’s another; though I don’t know that he’s *said* much to me, but he can’t blind his mother’s eyes, bless him!”

“But, Eppie,” said the wheelwright, and so earnestly that he made the wrinkled hands quite tremble; “for God’s sake don’t keep anything from me now; do you know if the lad’s going to make any move yet about her? but surely he isn’t yet?”

“And why not?” demanded Eppie. “My goodness me, father, why nobody ’ud think as you ’ud lived to

see your son's name in the half-a-dozen papers he brought home last year, and which, please God, I'll keep by me so long as I'm spared; nobody 'ud think you had lived to see his name set up in print, like that, and to see him a gentleman, with a gentleman's ways and all — that they wouldn't, to hear you talk! Why shouldn't he go in to old Chorley with the best of them, and ask for his daughter, if he wants his daughter? She's a good sort of lass, but she's no more than other people's daughters to ask for, that I know on. But you're out o' sorts, father, and no wonder!"

"Eppie, tell me at once — I must know, when is Christopher going to speak to Chorley?"

She was quite frightened, for he had caught her sleeve, and was waiting for her answer with a face full of keen wistful anxiety.

"Father!" she exclaimed.

"Eppie, tell me."

"But it's a secret between me and Kit. I've known it ever so long, and kep' it for him. A lad can't tell his father everything."

"Eppie, tell me."

"Well then, yes, he is going to speak to her father; and why not? It's been all planned a long time since, and they're going to speak to the old gentleman when he comes back from London; and they're coming here to-day to settle between themselves and all of us about

the time and all, and if you'd a waited you'd ef heard why. Why there he is, father; there is Kit. Make haste and undo the gate. Don't let him come in here till I've got my cap on."

"God help him!" said the wheelwright, lifting himself heavily from the window-ledge. "Poor lad! poor lad!"

The old black door having been left open, Kit and his companion had already entered the yard, and were stooping to acknowledge the vehement welcome of Merrylegs.

The wheelwright watched them as they came slowly up the path under the little trees which arched over their heads, and made pictures of them as they came along.

They had come by boat from Todness to Fairleigh, and Kit was looking a little tired and flushed, but so well and handsome, his father thought, in his light rowing dress, and so happy, that the sight of his face almost made him raise his finger and point to that closed white window at the corner of the house. But he refrained from doing so, and continued watching them silently as they came towards him. *She*, too, was looking very pretty, he could but own—more girlish and sweet, because happier, than ever he had seen her.

She reminded him, in her dress of pale pink muslin, and brown shawl and hat, of the faint autumn roses

he had just been nailing against the rich leaves of the Virginia creeper; and as she drew near, the same kind of shrinking came over him that he had felt when he had bruised and crushed one of them with his clumsy hammer.

But she was close to him now, holding out her little hand with a timid yearning smile. He just touched it, and let it go, saying gruffly —

“Quite well, I thank you,” though she had made no inquiry about his health, and then turned to Christopher.

“Kit,” he said, “if Miss Chorley ’ud be so good as to sit down in the parlour till your mother’s ready, I want to have a bit o’ talk with you before tea.”

“O pray, do not mind me, Uncle Vallon!” said Constance; “I’m not quite such a stranger here as to sit down in state and be waited upon. You can be as long as ever you like, Kit: I shall go and find your grandfather.”

The wheelwright caught her arm, almost roughly, as she was turning away.

“Don’t go to that side of the house, please; don’t go near his room at all. We’re all obliged to be quiet now; he’s took to his bed. I think she’d better sit in the parlour, Kit, if you please.”

“Certainly I will do so, if you wish it,” answered Constance, while a look of surprise passed between her and Kit. “I’m sorry to hear about grandfather.”

“Thank you, yes. Come, Kit, we’ll take a turn on the Knoll.”

Constance stood in the porch looking after them, through the fallen leaves, as they passed down the garden, and her eyes filled with tears. This long, rich, autumnal day had been so full of happiness for her, that her heart swelled with an almost passionate resistance at the weight and sickening foreboding which had fallen on it at the first tone of the wheelwright’s voice. She watched them till the red foliage hid them from her, and then turned into the house. Though the little hall and parlour were gay with vases of fresh flowers, and possessed many comforts in the way of soft mats and pretty stands and chairs she had never seen in them in old times, and though the thick autumn sunbeams floated about, with the waving of the trees, like warm golden forms over the fresh carpet, yet there was such a chill, deathly silence throughout the house that she could not help shivering as she sat down. Kit’s little brother, she supposed, must have been sent away on account of grandfather’s illness, for the stairs which she could see from the parlour looked as spotless, white, silent, and desolate, as if no child’s foot had touched them through all time. The apparition of Eppie coming down them at last, in her stiff black satin gown and high crowned cap, made her actually start. She managed, however, to meet her old friend and future mother-in-law with a

smile, though a very faint one, and that faded when Eppie let fall her hand directly she touched it, and said, "Be seated, miss."

She sat down, but before she could turn away her head, she felt the tears dropping on her hands, hot and fast.

It had been poor Eppie's nervousness which made her manner cold and stiff. Directly she saw, by the tears, that her boy's first love was the same sensitive, trustful little thing as ever, and not by any means the fashionable young lady she had sometimes pictured to herself during latter years — directly she saw this, her heart welled up with love for her, and she took the fragile, tearful face between her hard hands and kissed it with all motherliness.

"My child, my darling lassie! How pretty she is! Come, let me look at her! Crying? O, what a silly lassie!"

While the "silly lassie" cried, and laughed, and blushed, with her face hidden in the bosom of Kit's mother, poor Kit himself was passing over some very thorny ground.

Too vexed to speak, he walked along by his father's side till the thick carpeting of leaves made him aware, without looking up, that they had ascended the Knoll — a little bit of wild wood, in which were packed, so close together as to almost shut out the air, some of the grandest old trees in the county.

They had hardly entered under the heavy shade of these trees before the wheelwright stood still, laid his hand on Christopher's arm, and said,—

“This will do, my boy; we needn't go further, only I couldn't tell you under the very same roof with her.”

Kit's brown cheek went a shade paler, and he fixed an impetuous, questioning glance on his father's face.

The wheelwright sat down on a felled tree trunk that lay right across their path, stuck his fingers through his hair, his elbows on his knees, and when he spoke seemed to be talking to some one whom he saw prostrate with a great sorrow on the dead leaves at his feet, rather than to the young man leaning against the tree opposite him, with a smile of confident, unshaken happiness.

“It's what comes on us all, my boy, sooner or later, just to show us what poor creatures we are, I suppose, by ourselves; a trouble that doesn't only hurt us when and where we stand, like a heavy blow, but a trouble that runs over a great piece of a man's life, years gone by and years coming, so that if you look forrads it's there, or back'ards and it's there too. I've had such a trouble in my day, Kit, and now there's one on you, and if I could take it on my own shoulders for you, God knows I would.”

The wheelwright paused, rubbed his hands slowly together, and then plunged them into his hair again.

“My lad,” he said, still looking on the dead leaves,

“you’ve worked hard these five years, and we all know what for.”

He stopped, for though he had never once looked up, he felt that Kit’s eyes were getting very keen and bright in their questioning but still proud and confident gaze.

Worked — ay, Kit had indeed worked these five years, how hard and bravely few could tell, and with little encouragement; for Daniel Chorley, though he had no power to keep Kit from passing over the breach between their two positions, and though he did not feel at all confident of keeping them apart when that breach was crossed, still, through his intense dislike for Kit, and a faint hope that Constance might yet change in her feeling for him, threw every possible obstacle in the way of their meeting or even writing to each other; and Constance was too well used to submission to complain now; while Kit, until his position was certain, was much too proud to think of making any resistance.

A strong assuring gaze from those sad sweet eyes, lifted to him Sunday after Sunday in the old church, and now and then, perhaps, a moment’s holding of hands in the crowded church doorway, a smile across the street — this was all Kit had had from year to year to keep his hope alive, but it was enough. It is true that sometimes he would let a little mock bitterness steal into his brown eyes as they met hers,

but it was only to make her answering gaze yet more kind and tender, and he was really content.

“Yes, my lad,” the wheelwright went on, “we all know how you’ve worked, and what you’ve worked for, what hope you had, and — —”

“Hope!”

“Ay, Kit, hope; it was only hope. Don’t be deceived, my lad, you could never have felt certain of her bein’ your wife; you could only *hope* to win her, however hard you worked.”

“Father, when I told you I would, I meant it. It’s taken two years longer than I thought, but I believe it’s done.”

“Kit, when your mother was a learnin’ you to walk, I’ve seen her take the wooden apple off the mantelshelf, and hold it a little ahead to entice you on; then, when you got up to it, she’d take it a bit further, and a bit further, and so on, and you got so savage after it that you soon walked, ay, and run too, quite wonderful; well, one day you grabbed hold of it, and set your teeth in it, and felt it was wood, and roared a good ’un; but, Kit, your being disappointed in it didn’t alter the good it had done in learnin’ you to walk; and it’s so with a greater One than your mother. He knows what poor creatures we are, and when he can’t make us do our duty as we ought, he often sets something ahead of us, like your hope, my boy, that he means to take away before we reach it.”

“For God’s sake, father, what has this to do with me now?”

The wheelwright got up and laid one hand on Kit’s arm and the other on his shoulder, and Kit dared not look down into his eyes, he *felt* they were so full of this terrifying, unendurable pity, for which he denied all reason.

“My son, if by cutting my right hand off I could save saying, Kit, you must give her up, I would do it. Don’t laugh like that, my boy; it’s true; you must, you will. This little girl, Kit, as you’ve took into your heart, as we’ve all took into our hearts for your sake, isn’t worthy of you; you must give her up; you mustn’t go back to the house now to see her. No, no; hold still, and listen. Recollect now how she came to us first of all; what a mystery you yourself thought it, her leaving home after that fire. Recollect how many besides your uncle Humphrey warned us to have nothing to do with her; and how for all her seeming openness and meek innocent ways, there was always some kind of mystery about her we could none of us make out. Now recollect all this, Kit. You know where I went this morning, to Todness, to meet Rowbotham; well, he took me over the house he’s building, and then we went and had a bit o’ dinner at the ‘Dolphin,’ and we got talking o’ one thing and another, till the Chorleys came up; and he was saying how old Chorley stood a good chance of being

member o' parliament, and how bad his boy was going on, and what a wonderful lift they'd had in the world since he went to Aberford, to take notes of the damage done by the fire; and then he told me, Kit; then he told me. I looked at the man as if I wished his words 'ud a choked him before they had reached my ears, and got up and came away without speaking. God knows when I should ha' told you, if your mother hadn't let it out that you meant to speak to Chorley at once; but now I must—no, don't sit down, Kit; don't laugh; stand up and listen and bear it as if I was going to fetch you a heavy blow. My boy, this thing's a mystery no longer. Yon woman, as you've worked for, and as you'd bring home to your mother to be a daughter to her, isn't fit to set her foot on our doorstep; but has done a thing, ay, and when she was little more than a child, that must ha' took the malice and passion of a devil to do. Kit, it was she set fire to the house, and might ha' burned her father and her little brother in their beds."

At first the wheelwright thought it was the sunlight flinkering down through the red leaves upon Kit's face, but when he had brushed some moisture from his own eyes with his coat sleeve, he saw that Kit was smiling; and his face, with the light of perfect faith and love upon it, was so beautified for the moment, that it reminded the wheelwright of Eppie in her early youth and his own love dream, and his chest heaved.

“Don’t look at me like that, my boy! it’s true.”

“Father,” said Kit, and though he still smiled, his hand shook, and there was a kind of dull, smouldering fury in his eye, “that man shall answer for this. Let us go home. As you say, these things have been left too long unexplained. I have a right to ask her now what she has kept a secret from me all this time, and what she might have kept a secret to the end of our lives without *my* doubting her — I mean the cause of her leaving home as she did, which has given rise to this foul scandal. Come home, father; she shall not leave herself open to doubt one hour longer. She shall tell us all about it.”

“My poor lad,” said the wheelwright, turning away.

“I say she shall,” and Kit’s strong thumb and finger gripped his father’s arm like a vice, and pulled him over the dead leaves and knotted roots till they were out of the Knoll.

Kit threw the old gate open with a violence that made the black palings shake, and strode up the garden in advance of his father, who tried in vain to keep pace with him.

When the two men entered the little parlour, Constance was sitting on a stool at Eppie’s feet; and Eppie was lifting and weighing the rich dark curls in her wrinkled hand.

“Constance.”

The sound of Kit’s voice made her rise instantly;

but when she turned and saw them stand there, Kit with flushed face, and with eyes that almost glittered with restrained passion, and behind him the wheelwright, pale and wretched, she shrank back a step, and caught Eppie's arm.

"Constance," Kit said, made almost desperate by the look of suspicion with which his father's eyes followed this movement, "we have been engaged five years, and all that time you have kept a secret from me. As far as I am concerned, you would be welcome to keep it all your life, but as things are, you can do so no longer. My father has heard some of the foulest lies about you concerning that fire that were ever breathed; he has heard that you yourself caused it. I am sorry to say, he believes what he has heard; because your leaving home, and your secrecy as to the cause, seem to him to make the story true. Now, Constance, I have refused to say one word in answer. The man who originated this calumny shall be answered in something harder than words; but it would be impossible for me to bear the thought that this kind of suspicion should have hold on my father and mother an instant longer. So I ask you, what I should, very likely, never have asked you if this had not happened, to tell them and me at once the whole story of this fire, and the cause of your leaving home."

It was strange that while these hurried yet measured words seemed cold and harsh enough to the aston-

ished Eppie, and even to the wheelwright himself, to Constance, who stood listening with her hand arrested a few inches above Eppie's arm, they expressed a more passionate love, a deeper tenderness, than Kit had ever yet revealed to her. When he ceased speaking, she stood still, her little hands laid tightly one upon the other before her, in that attitude of calm resignation habitual to her, and her eyes raised to Kit's face, with the awe and stupor of a mariner fascinated by the beauty of the tempest that is wrecking his ship. She knew that while Kit's husky, passionate voice had been like a new revelation of love, his words had enclosed some dreadful horror, the exact sense of which had scarcely yet reached her.

Kit yearned to go and put his arms about her, and tell her that he trusted against all the world; but in his outraged pride and exultant confidence, he chose that his father should see her stand alone in the strength of her innocence and repel his doubts.

It was several moments before she became conscious that the three stood there watching her and waiting for her to speak. What was it they wanted her to say? She turned her head from one to the other in bewilderment, then put her hand to her forehead, and recalled all that Kit had said, sentence by sentence, with wonderful accuracy. Her head fell forwards upon her breast, her hands folded again with the meekness of one who has long been used to endure. She

understood all now; the curse of that one act of Daniel Chorley was to be visited upon his children still—had followed her past the old Plague Stone—and now, after ten long years, awaited her here, even in Kit's home. At first it seemed impossible to submit; and an overpowering impulse seized her to throw herself at Kit's feet, and tell him all, and clear herself to his father and mother for his sake, and to make good his trust in her. She would do so; surely they three were more to her than *him*. Yes, she would tell them all.

She guided herself across the room to where Kit stood, and fell with a great sob on his shoulder.

"Speak, Constance," he whispered, as much agitated as herself. "Speak quickly, darling, and have this over."

She tried to speak, but even while she sought for words to put her confession into, there darted across her mind a clear and distinct recollection of the promise she had made her father, and which he had made her solemnly repeat more than once. She started back from Kit pale and trembling.

"O, Kit, I cannot, I cannot. O, I dare not."

The wheelwright stood up and came between them, motioning her back sternly, and said to Kit—

"This is enough, my boy. Make no more misery for yourself; let her go."

"Go!" echoed Kit, looking round at her with heavy

bloodshot eyes, as she took her hat and shawl from a chair, and began putting them on; "Constance, Constance, what is this? You have not spoken yet, and you are going!"

But she was not to be again moved. All her old power of endurance and self-sacrifice seemed to have returned to her with renewed strength.

"Kit," she said, in a sweet mournful voice, as she gently put his hand from her, "do not touch me. You grieve your father. I am going, and I forbid you to follow me, or ever to seek me again, until he knows me better. Perhaps that may never be; if it depends on my answering the question you put to me just now, it certainly never will. But before I go, I wish to say this to you, Kit, and to your father and mother; I am as innocent of this thing with which I am charged as either of you three standing there; but I can give you nothing but my simple word. I cannot even say, 'enquire about me, or about that dreadful night when you saved my life;' on the contrary, I beseech you all to let things rest as they are, and to ask no more questions of this man from whom you have heard these things of me—a favour which, since I shall never trouble you again, I feel I have a right to ask."

Some minutes after the sound of her voice had ceased, Kit, who had been sitting with his head bowed in his hands, looked up. The figure in the doorway had vanished. There was no one in the room

but his father and mother, who stood on either side of him, each with a hand on his shoulder.

“What was it?” he asked, looking at them heavily. “Why did she go? Did she say it was true? Father, she didn’t say it was true.”

The wheelwright turned away from him without replying. *He* felt it to be true enough.

A look of intense anguish and desolation came over Kit’s face as they watched him.

“I don’t care if it is true; it was a minute’s passion, such as we all have sometimes, nothing more. I shall bring her back. I don’t care if it is true!”

He snatched his straw hat from the floor and went out. As he stood on the green looking about him with wild uncertain eyes, he thought he saw the flutter of a pink dress among the dark trees of the Knoll, through which the road to Fairleigh lay, and ran towards it. Yes it was she. She heard his footsteps in the dead leaves, and stood awaiting him with a smile full of holy joy and triumph. She felt sure he came to tell her he still trusted her, and Kit’s trust was a great treasure to bear with her into her solitary, joyless world.

As Kit reached her, he threw himself down on the leaves at her feet and caught hold of her dress.

“Constance! Constance! don’t leave me! It was a minute’s passion. If there’s anything to forgive, I forgive it; but come back, don’t leave me like this.”

She gazed down upon him as he besought her, and spoke of forgiving her, and a look of surprise and anguish settled on her face.

She drew her dress away from him proudly and mournfully.

“Good bye, my friend. God grant there may come a day when you will know me better. If ever there should, remember that *I forgive you.*”

She passed from him, on under the trees, and the dead leaves fell between them with a sighing, dreary sound, that almost drove him mad. Gradually, as all hope fled from him with her vanishing form, his heart seemed to grow ravenous in assuring itself of her guilt. In his despair he could have shouted fearful names after her: it seemed to him the very bars of sunlight penetrating the wood were red accusing fingers pointing at her. With such thoughts as these he dared not go home; but got up and paced in and out amongst the melancholy trees, till those red sunset bars got lower and died out; and the heavy dews fell, till the yellow harvest moon looked down upon him. Then when he had starved all the bitterness out of him and was only utterly wretched, he dragged himself home.

CHAPTER XVI.

LIFE'S LAST CHORDS.

EPPIE was sitting crying quietly over the untouched dainties in the parlour; the wheelwright was in the kitchen, alone, smoking. Kit went in and dropped into a chair, and, from very weariness, let his two arms fall on the table and his head on his arms. The wheelwright came and touched him gently on the shoulder.

“Kit, are you angered against me for having told you this? I told you I’d sooner cut off my right hand.”

“No, no; but let me alone, father. I am sick of my life.”

“But, my boy, your life wasn’t give you to devote to one thing. There’s a many things to live for still, and work for.”

“Work,” said Kit, lifting his head wearily. “I shall never touch it again; everything may go.”

“My boy, when your little twin sisters died I said those very words, — ‘I can’t go to work again.’ I said to your mother, ‘everything may go’; and I didn’t work, not for days and days. Eppie prayed and begged, but I was deaf to her; and I stuck in this chair like a block; and they had to sell things out o’ the house for food; but one day your grandfather comes to me, and says in his helpless way, ‘I’m so hungry,

Jack,' he says: 'I worked for you when you was a boy; you'll never let me starve.' That fetched me round like a blow. 'No, God forbid me, father,' I said, and went out and worked till the sweat rolled off me. Kit, I worked for you when you was a boy; it's time I got a little rest now. I've had a break down, my boy, since you were home before; and it might ha' been too much for me, if I hadn't felt I'd got you. Kit, my lad, you must be something more than a son to me now."

Kit looked up with a quick interrogative glance. It was the first time he had thought of grandfather that day. Now he remembered his father said he was lying ill.

"Come and see him, Kit," said the wheelwright; "maybe it 'll do you good."

Kit rose mechanically and followed him to the foot of those white, silent-looking stairs. There his father paused and said "hush;" and gently put off his boots. Kit's rowing shoes were thin, and made no noise as he followed him up. They stopped outside a door opening on the narrow strip of landing—the same door which had so often been slammed to impatiently, to shut out the noise of grandfather's fiddle.

The wheelwright pressed down the latch as softly and gently as though he feared to awaken some light sleeper in the room; and, entering, he motioned silently to Kit to follow him. They did not go many

steps, but stood still midway between the door and the bed: the long, narrow bed standing there in the moonlight, awfully white, and smooth, and stiff, rising grave-like in the middle with the outline of a rigid, silent form.

“My boy, you must be more than a son to me now.”

Kit looked on the still figure in silence, and his chest heaved. Grandfather had been to him nurse, playmate, master; and he felt as if the last link that bound him to his bright, happy boyhood had broken, and he was now a grave and careworn man, in whom all the restless ambition and passionate fervour of youth was dead.

While they stood looking, Kit started, for there on the pillow lay one dark object. The wheelwright saw his look, and nodded, saying, with a quivering lip and a voice of broken tenderness —

“Ay, it’s the fiddle you gave him, Kit. He would have it to the very last; and, as one may say, he played hisself out with it, and we don’t like to take it away now. It’s always been a wonderment to me why the Almighty should ha’ give him that passion for music, and not one bit o’ talent for it; but oh! lad, we can’t judge of these things, we can’t; for, Kit, when he lay here a-scrapetin’ with his last bit o’ strength, all of a sudden he drops the fiddle, and starts up and falls a-listening, and his face flushes

and brightens up like a young man's, and says he, 'Hark! hark! music! music! Do you hear? There it is, what I have been trying to do all my life. Ah, now I can play—now I can play!' And he fell back, and never spoke another word, and I thought as your mother's heart would ha' broke, she's always been so hard on his fiddle. There, come, lad, come; his music 'll never jar on us again. If he ever plays now, he plays like them as played away his soul. Kit, Kit, I thought I'd got over it, but he was my father, and he's cut down. O Kit! O my boy!"

Kit led him gently from the solemn little room, and back to his place by the kitchen fire; and the two men sat up alone all night, drawing comfort from each other without either speaking a word.

CHAPTER XVII.

WOUNDED, TO THE COVERT.

KNEE-DEEP through the ferns; unconscious of the beaten track that she might so easily have found; gliding in the moonlight past the chequered trees—here black, there almost silver;—meeting no one; incapable of any active thought, of any wish or any fear; feeling only the unutterable anguish of her sudden loss, which quite shut out the sense of her cruel wrong, Constance passed alone through the thick old woods that lay between her and her home.

Continuous bodily movement was the sole thing that seemed capable of giving her relief, and of enabling her to bear the now intolerable load of life. Once only she stopped, as if in meditation, and seemed to hesitate; and then she seated herself on the wall of a low bridge that spanned a gleaming water-course, and sat a long time motionless.

Fantastic shadows from the neighbouring trees played about the whitened ground at her feet; and her eyes felt a kind of charm in watching them, as the tangled forms separated and met again in dreamy play. She could not look up; she knew the moon was shining there in wondrous beauty, and would mock her by its tender smile.

And then, in spite of the strong will which had persisted in shutting out all thoughts of the past, she found herself insensibly gliding back to the night of the fire, and to the room in her father's house at Aberford; to the terrible burning beam above her head, that had seemed to her a flaming gigantic sword about to fall; to the pangs of her passage to the very gates of death; and to the sight of *his* face, so earnestly turned upon her as he bore her away in safety in his strong arms. From thence it was only too easy to pass to that walk by the water side, under the towering chestnuts, and to stand there again listening to his wild whistle as it mingled with the sounds of the river; and to shudder at the recollection of her new-

born happiness, and at those dim but delicious revelations of the depth and richness of life. It were well if she could have stopped there. But she hears once more that cry across the shingle—"Constance! Constance!" which had brought her tremblingly back to him to receive the first kiss of love.

"O God! this cannot be true!" she cried. She stood up in a trembling ecstasy, her arms outstretched, and her lips quivering with the yet unborn cry that should now respond to his, and bring him back, when a new emotion stayed her, and she dropped down on her seat with head bent, hands falling helplessly by her knees, and she wept long and bitterly.

But she rose at last, and resumed her journey. Thorns pierced her feet, and she moaned with the unexpected pain. But it was not they that forced from her the almost childish cry, but the thought of him who only a few hours ago had been so careful of her every step.

By the time she reached home, she felt only a kind of dull, aching sense of mental suffering; for her nervous and sensitive frame—worn out by fatigue, bruised by the stones, and pierced by the thorns,—was in torture; and made her frequently say to herself, "O to lie down—and rest—even if it were for ever! O, if I might but rest!"

She was glad to remember that her father was away from the house. She could shut herself up in her

own room, and wrestle or submit, as God might please. But what is this she sees? Lights in all the windows; carriages going into and coming out of the court-yard; men with trays on their heads from the neighbouring confectioner's, stooping as they pass into the house through the low door in the basement. Her father must have come home — must be giving a supper. He will be wanting her. "O, not that! not that, now!" she cried, as she glided across the moonlit road, to enter by a private door, used only by the family, and of which she had a key.

In the passage she met the maid whom her father had lately forced upon her as a necessary adjunct to his and her social position.

"I am so glad, Miss, you have come. Mr. Chorley has been back some hours, and been asking for you. He sent a messenger by the Beverley road to meet you. Did you come that way?"

"That way!" repeated Constance, vacantly, as she looked at the woman. She then put her hand to her head — trying vainly to remember anything she had seen or been conscious of for the last hour or more — since, indeed, she had left the wood; then she was about to pass on, but recalled the words about her father.

"Tell him — I — I am not well to-night, and have gone to bed."

"He'll be so vexed, Miss, for he's been elected al-

derman, and he has hurried back from London to join the gentlemen to-morrow, which is a great corporation day, and they all go some miles down the river, and dine together. And he has invited some gentlemen to a breakfast here before they start in the morning, and they are now getting everything ready in the dining-room—setting out the table—just as if it were for something very grand, a wedding breakfast, or something of that kind. And you are to go with him; other ladies are going.”

“Tell him I will come down by-and-bye.”

Even more passionately now than before did Constance yearn to lie down on that white bed of hers, and turn her face from the light, and try to sink into unconsciousness. To have to talk, to enter into all the worldly interests and views of her father, to seem as if everything in the world was going on for her as of old, yet to know that to her henceforward the world was but one huge graveyard; where the only difference between the living and the dead was that the one must suffer while the other was in possession of eternal rest—all this was horrible. Could she do it? She knew not.

She opened her bed-room door; the light was falling on the bed, giving to it an almost sepulchral whiteness. She looked at it; she looked at the great round orb that seemed so full of divine happiness that it could not, perhaps, but think the mere sight of its happiness

ought to be enough to assuage the sorrows of poor benighted human kind; looked at the ghostly shadow on the wall of a bending woman made by the drapery of the curtains, then gave one upward look, one toss of the clenched hands, one thrill of anguish where body and soul alike met in a new communion, and then threw herself on the bed, face downwards, and forgot her father, herself, and everything in the world but *him*, and his thought that she must be guilty.

For an hour, or more, she lay thus undisturbed, for Mr. Chorley had found occupations that prevented him from thinking of his daughter; and happily she slept. Happily, for she thus obtained new strength. But to Constance, herself, that first moment of waking was the hardest of all to bear. How she had bounded up at the first glimpse of light on the morning of that very day, radiant with the faith that at last she and her lover were to be repaid for their many years of sacrifice! But though, as she raised herself and gazed around, the lips were quivering with intensest pain, they no longer gave forth any cry. And the eyes were at last drained of all their moisture, and knew the time had gone for the indulgence of tears.

She washed her face, tried to cool her burning brow, smoothed her hair, and was conscious of a vague wish that her father might not notice her, or ask any questions about *him*. Then, too, she suddenly recollected a particular danger.

“No, no, I must not tell him. He would endeavour to save me by sacrificing himself.” And then a bitter smile just flickered about the lips, at the thought that she possibly might thus regain Kit.

She went out on the landing, and stood leaning over the banister, looking down on the brilliant light streaming across the entrance hall. She heard busy footsteps moving in the dining saloon; the ringing sound of glass that had been accidentally touched; and then the dull heavy thud of some ponderous body that was being moved. Trying to collect her thoughts to understand what was passing, and instinctively conscious that she would thus best prepare herself for the dreaded but inevitable interview with her father, she suddenly tightened her grasp of the rail, as she remembered the interview she had expected to have had with him this very night, as the result of her meeting with Kit. Constance made out at last that they were placing the new statue, which her father, as a patron of local genius, had recently bought; and which he desired, no doubt, to display to his guests of the morning. Presently she heard her father complaining that the statue did not stand safely on the tall pedestal; and then a strange voice, probably the sculptor's, said —

“The floor gives way unequally below it, and must be strengthened, and then you will find both the statue and the pedestal immoveable. But I think you may

venture to leave it where it is, till after your breakfast to-morrow.”

Constance delayed now, as she had delayed before, the going down stairs; the sculptor's presence giving her a new excuse. So she fled back, as a wounded bird goes to its nest, or a stricken deer to its covert, and sat down on a low chair by the bedside, and let her hand rest on a little table. In doing this she touched a letter. She clutched it with an almost joyous cry:—

“It is from him,—sent up while I have been listening. O Kit! Kit! Kit!” She ran out to fetch a chamber light which was burning on the landing, came back, looked at her letter, and O! the sickness of heart as she saw that it was not from him—it was from 'Duke, her brother.

As soon as she could read it—she did so. These were the contents:—

Trin. Coll. Cam., Thursday.

DEAR OLD CON,

I am once more in trouble, and to whom can I come for help but to you, my good angel, my own ever dear—dear sister?

You know what a miserable allowance father gives me, three hundred a year—and you know my fortune by and bye, nearly eight thousand a year, and with no encumbrance except you, my dear old Con—and my very narrow-minded stingy governor. Well, this

is how the matter stands. After getting deepish in debt, and after borrowing at awful interest from Jews and other gentry of the same kind who wouldn't let me alone—I am obliged to say—father really must help me out of the scrape once more, and set things straight. You know, dear old Con, it isn't his money, though 'pon my life I sometimes fancy he thinks so. But by Jove if I were to die, he'd find his mistake. I've been obliged to go into affairs a bit, and I have discovered that I have only what they call a life interest in the property, and that it must go to my heirs—if I get any. Funny idea—isn't it, of the old colonel? He seems to have been "family" mad.

Will you, dear old Con, try once more what can be done? I daren't tell you till I see you how much money I must have. But this I'll promise you. Never more to know even of the existence of a Jew or money-lender. Never again to exceed—much—my allowance. And when I get of age, I'll take care to settle on you and the governor every shilling that I can spare for the first few years to make you both independent. So don't think me so bad after all—whatever I or others may tell you. You won't, will you, my own dear dear old Con, that I went once wandering about the world with, like two beggar children.

You will get this early in the day, and you will see me following it late in the night. Things have come to a crisis. But I have said enough. God bless

you, and save you from ever being as miserable as your brother

MARMADUKE.

Not even the presence of a despair so great, and which seemed to envelope her as with the folds of a serpent, that waited only its own chosen time to press the life-blood from her heart, could make Constance insensible to this appeal. Next to Kit, all her affection had been lavished on 'Duke; for, unlike her father, 'Duke returned her love, and was proud of it; not so much for her sake, as for the satisfaction it gave him to be properly appreciated.

She read, and read again, and then let her thoughts go back to the time he had referred to. Once more she saw the golden curls of the boy as they floated about by the plague-stone while he was letting loose his bird; once more she felt the warm soft flesh of his legs as she held him in her arms towards the close of their second day's adventures, when he had begun to cry with fatigue and hunger, and to repine that they had left their home, and she had snatched him up, and borne him along till she dropped senseless on the heath beneath the burden. Once more she saw him crossing the moor between the golden furze on his way to school, and remembered her thankfulness to God that he was safe at last.

Had she judged correctly in this? she now asked herself, as she had often asked before, during 'Duke's

years of college life. And that question led to another, and more perplexing one. Ought she not to have kept him there? Had she done right to come back to her father in his prosperity, and replace 'Duke under his influence? She could not conceal from herself that 'Duke's nature was not like her own, sown with desires for an ideal life of goodness, and beauty, and love, but rather with seeds that sprang into a fearful growth of boundless indulgence. Compelled to exertion in a different walk of life he might have turned out kind, industrious, and able to achieve some sort of intellectual, possibly artistic, skill. He had been fond of drawing at the school to which the Vallons had sent him. But he was fond of nothing but sport, and of boyhood's worst excesses, at the school to which he was removed as the heir of the rich Colonel Armstrong. College had finished his education in this way, by relieving him of such small control as the Rev. Mr. Garway had cared to maintain over his more distinguished "young friends." But why dwell on the story? Is it not common enough? Do we not habitually, and almost as a part of the religion of society, yearly send to our universities a due supply of all the young blood of the best English families, in order that they may there be weeded by the speedy destruction of the weakest; who go home, some to die of disease, some to live a melancholy memorial of how the learning of christian England teaches the doctrine

—the race is only to the strong; some to witness through a long life of shame the poverty to which they have reduced poor and decayed, but still hopeful parents, who had staked their all on their boy's future.

Only dimly could Constance see these things, as she wondered why it should be a part of the ordinance of things that youth should go forth so fresh and eager and full of exulting hope, and come back so utterly wrecked. But what did those words of his mean, that she was not to care about what others might say of him? What could they say of him? His extravagance did not concern them. It was foolish, no doubt, and must be owing to her own present depressed way of looking at things, but she could not get rid of the fear that 'Duke had not told her all, or the worst.

She thought she would now go down and see her father. Perhaps she might prepare him not to be too angry with 'Duke. Then thinking to please him by saying she had been getting ready for the morning, she took out from the wardrobe a white silk dress he had purchased for a recent flower-show, and laid it on the bed. This she knew he would wish her to wear; so to soften its display she put out a gauzy black lace dress to wear over the white; and then a sudden sob and passion of tears broke from her, for she thought the white silk looked so like a wedding dress. This again rendered necessary fresh delay, and

fresh bathing of the silly eyes, and of the feverish cheeks. By that time her candle had burnt out, so she sat down motionless by the bed, looking at the costly dress that lay across it glistening in the moonlight; for she felt as if she could not move it aside, but must sit there looking at it with a kind of fascination.

Minute after minute did she thus sit with her eyes fixed on that white, lustrous heap upon the bed, till a full hour had passed; and the moon, which for some time had waxed dimmer and dimmer, at last left her little room in utter darkness.

Then she could be still no longer; and, rising with a low, shivering sigh, she opened her door, glided down the first flight of stairs, and stood looking again into the hall, which was now only dimly lighted. The house was very quiet. The servants had been sent to bed some hours ago, and only two persons besides herself were stirring. Mr. Chorley was waiting 'Duke's arrival from London; and Constance could hear him pacing up and down his study, picturing, no doubt, both for his son and himself a magnificent future: already there was a talk, as has been said, of the latter being elected to Parliament. The other nocturnal watcher was a maiden relative of Mr. Chorley, who had chosen to keep guard all night over the long dining-room table, which was already spread with delicacies for the aldermanic breakfast.

The door stood open; and, as Constance leant over the banisters, she could see, by the light of the one wax candle, the tall, straight figure of Miss Martha Chorley, stalking up and down each side of the table in her black dress, arranging and re-arranging the plates, the bouquets and other decorative ornaments, with a funereal solemnity that seemed not out of keeping with the stony, set face and joyless eyes that were watching her.

And now too, through some movement of Miss Martha with a candle, light fell upon the statue just within the entrance arch; where no doubt Mr. Chorley had thought it would be very impressive to his expected visitors. Constance knew it well, a spiritless version in marble of the fine old idea in which justice, typified by the sternly beautiful features of a female divinity, is blinded so that she may see no distinction of persons, but holds evenly balanced scales in which to weigh the deeds of men, and a sword for the punishment of the guilty. The statue had not impressed Constance; but she had no doubt her father's idea was a noble one, that of placing before his eyes hourly a reminder of the exalted spirit in which the duties of the magistrate should be performed.

And thus a long time passed, and never once did the expression of that white, watching face change. But at last, as the hall clock struck four, the still figure bending over the banisters straightened itself

stiffly, and then shrank down shivering on the stairs with a low, smothered, pleading cry of—

“And will it be so? O my God, my God, will it be so, that I shall never see him again, and that he will die believing me—what his father said?”

At this moment a violent ringing of the house bell, followed by an impatient knocking at the door, made her start. 'Duke then had come, and she must collect herself to stand between father and son.

As she listened to assure herself it was 'Duke, she became aware of a strange creeping feeling all over her that she could not understand; it was as though some dreadful thing, which no human eye could see, were passing by, and touching her. Perhaps it was only the recollection of how she had similarly stood on the landing of the old house at Aberford, looking down into the darkness and listening; and, how out of that night so awful an event for her had arisen,—perhaps it was only this that affected her with so superstitious a feeling just now. Whatever it might be, her whole frame shuddered, as she said to herself once more,—

“What is going to happen? O, what is going to happen?” And then, almost with a smile, she murmured, “As if anything more could happen for me!”

It was not 'Duke she heard enter a moment after. It was Mr. Massey the lawyer, who had had the management of the property under Colonel Armstrong,

and who still retained it under Mr. Chorley's temporary rule. Thinking it was 'Duke (who had announced his coming to his father also), Mr. Chorley went forward to the entrance hall.

"Massey—that you?" he exclaimed, as he saw who it was who came with so much uproar into the house at daybreak.

"Yes, Sir, it's me," Constance heard him say. And then his voice dropped, and he was probably whispering. But her father seemed transported with rage. She heard him — while her blood curdled with horror — giving vent to a volley of imprecations, as the two men went on together through the saloon, and so into Mr. Chorley's private study.

"What can be the matter?" she asked herself, sinking in heart, as she knew that she was no longer able to act as of old. Heroic fortitude and self-sacrifice seemed delusions now. Even the misery of her father and brother no longer appealed to her as they would have done under any other circumstances. She would have given anything that she possessed to benefit either of them, if anybody could have pointed out how the particular sacrifice was to be made. But the faith that armed her for any kind of forlorn hope was dead; for love was dead — and life was thenceforward meaningless.

Presently there came another and still more furious knocking at the door. This, as she expected, brought

forth her father and the lawyer; the former in a state of such excitement that Mr. Massey found it impossible to get him to listen to any advice, however timely, necessary, or prudent.

Miss Martha let in the new intruder.

“Ha! Miss Chorley — have I kept you up? Never mind. You look younger than ever,” was ‘Duke’s salutation; which seemed to be received in grim silence by the ancient lady, for no reply was heard. Then there was a laugh, and then a rapid step heard, and then in a moment more Constance saw her brother, through the imperfect light, moving across the hall towards the saloon. How she watched and listened! — her heart the while almost ceasing to beat under the growing sense of impending calamity. No wonder that every incident, however trivial, of the next few minutes was for ever afterwards burned as with a hot iron into her brain.

“Father!” was the young man’s salutation, as he met the two advancing forms. There was no reply.

“Father, I am very sorry that——” Then Constance heard her father interrupt ‘Duke in what he was going to say, and the tone of his voice was so unnatural, that she would not have recognised it as his, if it had been possible that anyone else could have been there, and so spoken.

“Are all these bills correct?” There was a pause — and then ‘Duke said,

“I—I—believe so. The fact is, they think I am leaving College, and so have got suddenly uneasy.”

“Do you know the total amount?”

“Not exactly.”

“Tell him, Massey.”

“Thirteen hundred and sixty nine pounds,” said the harsh, grating voice of the lawyer, who was, not the less, striving to speak in the most soothing and expostulatory of tones.

“And that is the excess of a single year, over and above your allowance!” said Mr. Chorley.

“Well, father, I know it’s wrong, but don’t be hard on me. You know I can afford it.”

It was the kind of literal truth of this saying that probably drove Mr. Chorley at once beyond all bounds of reason or self-control.

“Marmaduke!” he cried. “You have forged on me.”

Mr. Massey now interfered, and endeavoured to give ‘Duke time for recollection, by explaining what had come to light. As well as Constance could make out, ‘Duke had tried to raise a considerable sum of money on the security of his future property, and had been obliged to undertake to get his father as trustee to join him; and that ‘Duke, secretly considering the whole property as his own particular affair, appeared to have persuaded himself that he might anticipate his father’s consent by himself affixing his signature. This, then, was the thing so darkly hinted at in ‘Duke’s

letter. But there was no longer time for Constance to reflect, she must act.

She tried to totter down the stairs to get between them, but her knees forbad their office, and she sank against the banister,—every faculty paralysed by this new charge, which seemed to have an inexplicable connection with the charge against herself, were it only in the extent of the guilt imputed. Breathlessly she waited for 'Duke's indignant answer. None came. It was her father who again spoke.

“You do not deny it?”

And still 'Duke was silent. He was guilty, then. 'Duke guilty! Her own dear brother, for whom she had risked and suffered so much to keep him pure, and truthful, and honest—he a forger!

“O God, where art thou?” Constance inly murmured. And now still more menacingly rose the father's voice,—

“Speak! is it true? Do you own yourself so black a villain?”

Why did not 'Duke speak? Why did he not do as he had said to himself he would—make the best of things, and play the penitent so successfully, that he might yet triumph among his companions over all obstacles? His silence seemed to madden the old man, as if the latter knew instinctively that there was rising in his son's breast passions furious and unscrupulous

as his own. But if 'Duke would not speak, the father could not be silent.

"I will expose you. The whole world shall know that ——"

"No, father, you won't do that" — came at last from 'Duke's lips, in a low, significant tone, though the voice a little trembled, as if at its own audacity. Constance would have given worlds to have been by his side now; to have clasped him in her arms, so that she might strangle at its birth the lurking thought that she felt was about to issue forth. She did with sudden effort rise, and get down two or three stairs, when she stopped in awe of the passing event over which she knew she had lost all control.

"And why not?" fiercely demanded Mr. Chorley.

"Because, father, I, on my part, know that which you would not like to have known — and ——"

The words are stopped in the speaker's throat — there is a frightful struggle — a violent fall against the pedestal of the statue — a hoarse shriek of alarm from the lawyer — and an instant after the house is shaken to its foundations by the fall of the marble statue, beneath which lies the crushed form of the erring but unhappy youth.

Constance never afterwards knew how she passed from that state of death in life which had so perplexed her. The next thing she could remember after listening so near the top of the stairs, was seeing the statue

lifted aside from 'Duke's body, as she stooped down to see if any life remained.

Daniel Chorley watched her as she lifted the bleeding flaxen head on to her lap—watched her as if his own life hung upon her look.

She sat on the ground with her back towards him. He clutched the lawyer's arm with clammy fingers for support, while watching her, and feeling certain she would presently turn, and dispel, by a glance or word, the horrible dread that was creeping over him. One moment of awful suspense, in which he seemed to endure years of agony, passed. Then he saw her head moving. She would turn—ah, yes, she would surely turn—and tell him what his very soul ached to know. O what he would forgive! O what his life should henceforth be if she did but turn and tell him that 'Duke lived.

At last she did turn, and looked at him wistfully, but with no such tidings in her face as he thought to see there—looked up at him only to shake her head with a ghastly, hysterical smile, and then she fell back and lay almost as white and still as the dead face upon her lap.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DAYLIGHT SHADES.

IT was March; the finest morning the new year had yet brought forth. Children stood at the street-corners of Todness with spare little bunches of prim-roses to sell, and the fruiterer's shop under the castle wall was a perfect little Eden of flowers and moss. All the poor invalids of St. Clement's swarmed to the beach and parade like so many sun-worshippers come forth to do homage to their god at his first relenting smile.

The fishermen sang as they mended their nets; the girls dawdled as they went down to the shingle with their baskets of linen on their heads; and the little children, tired of shouting and making war with the beach-stones, lay down at full length at the very edge of the sea, and stared at it as if every placid, lazy wave rolled towards them were a fresh volume of wonder. Although the sun shone down so warmly, the colour of the sky was pale—quite a pure and tender azure—but almost sad in its paleness, as it made you feel that the beauty of the spring morning was to be but fragile and transient—not a thing to last—to grow and deepen into summer. More winter storms were yet to gather and burst, more heavy rains to fall. The line of trees on the hill at the back of

the town laved their black tops in a stream of pale gold light, and all the grass on the hillside rippled sunnily, as if it felt the daisies astir amongst it. Pale invalids who had passed each other all the last summer and all the winter, each pitying the other, yet each resenting a pitying look himself, were seen that morning actually exchanging smiles of sympathy — some even discussing their maladies as if they had been friends for years. No one thought of congratulating his neighbour on the spring having set in; it seemed as if each feared that winter, on whom she had stolen a march, would hear, and rise up, and drive her back, stifling her sweet warm breath with his icy hand; silencing her singing birds by his fierce war blast; and planting his black banner in the heavens, where her tender, peaceful colours were now hung. But though very little was said at Todness that morning concerning the happy change of weather, almost every face, from the idle loungers on the parade down to that of the fisherman singing over the great holes which the unusually bountiful draught of fish had made in his net, bore grateful record of it.

Across this brilliant panorama, two figures were seen to pass slowly, from end to end of the parade. The man must have been naturally tall, but was now so bent and shrunk that the woman whose arm he held seemed the taller of the two. His face was thin and deeply lined, yet seemed, in spite of its age, as

if it had only recently fallen away, for the skin hung unpleasantly down the sides of the cheeks, and at the edge of the chin. He took off his hat to answer the respectful salutations that from time to time greeted him in spite of the worn character of his dress, and other signs of extreme poverty, and then the whole head appeared covered with long silver threads, that glittered and waved about in the sunshine and the light breeze. He was very feeble, and evidently needed the woman's arm; who, for additional security, let her other arm cross her breast, so that the hand might clasp his hand, and she might know he could not, by withdrawing it, fall suddenly, and without timely warning to her.

The woman was young, and might have been beautiful under different circumstances. If so, she had changed sadly. The smile that had once suggested to a delighted gazer on her face something so sweet and ineffable that he could compare it to nothing but the gleam of primroses and daffodils, was now rigid, mournful, almost stern. Her dress was also very shabby; and — through the dust of the road along which they had travelled, or through the pre-occupation of her thoughts by more serious matters — almost seemed to be worn without even the ordinary sense of womanly neatness. Thus when her father had insisted on stopping half a mile off to wash his hands and face, and had given a cottager a penny out of

their last remaining pittance to lend them the where-withal to brush their clothes and boots, she had stood aloof, as if unconcerned, till he was ready, when she again gave him the bodily support he needed. And then it had been that she had said to him her last word of remonstrance:—

“Father, can you not even yet spare us both the humiliation of thus showing ourselves? There is a road over there on the right by which we can get into the country at the back of the town, and save a mile or two.” But she no longer pleaded as she would have done in such a matter at a former time. She spoke coldly, as if conscious she would fail, and had lost the mental elasticity that made failure a thing to be resisted.

“Don’t begrudge me, Constance, this little pleasure,” said the old man, with tears in his eyes, and she said no more. And so they reached Todness, and passed along the sunny parade; their two black, slowly-moving figures being the whole way the subjects of universal observation and remark among the busy and picturesque assemblage of pleasure and health seekers.

Although she objected no further, the woman seemed to shrink from the observation that the man courted. She scarcely looked to the right or the left: only once her lip might have been seen to tremble with the burden of speech that must never more be spoken, as she gazed for a single instant on the beauty of

the glittering sea, and remembered a particular incident that had once happened to her on the neighbouring shore.

“How kind they all are! You see they have not forgotten me!” said the old man, who found another sort of sunshine in the respect that was shown to the “unfortunate gentleman” who was commonly said to have lost, on the same day, his son and his property in the town.

When they had reached the other end of the parade, the old man exclaimed, suddenly—

“Hark! why there’s music coming from the house. They might at least have spared me this outrage in my hour of adversity. Don’t you think so, Constance?”

She did not answer. She gave just a hurried glance at their stately former residence. She wondered, for a moment, whether it indicated any special event—could it be that just where her own wedding breakfast might have been expected to take place, other and happier persons were now tasting the fruit denied to her? Then she turned her head away, remembering only it was there her brother had died.

But when she was passing the part of the beach which was to her the one place in the whole world in which she had known the greatest possible human happiness, in order, as she supposed, that she might subsequently know what was to her the worst extreme of human pain, she could not help casting a single

desperate look that way; and instantly she stopped, and with such abruptness, that her father complained querulously—

“Constance, you hurt me.” But she only murmured in reply—and more to herself than to him,

“What does that crowd mean?”

Precisely in that little spot down by the sea, where Kit had first confessed to himself his love for her; where he had spoken so cruelly to her while thinking only of her father, and her sudden change of fortune; where they had at last looked into one another’s eyes, as only two such true, passionate, and loving souls can look when they first meet stripped of all the world’s conventionalities—precisely there, where life seemed for her to make quite a leap upwards, and place itself thenceforward nearer by infinite degrees to heaven and to God,—there she saw now a group in a kind of rude circle, gazing on some object inside lying on the shingle.

“Father, sit down here on this stone; I will not be gone above a minute.” And without waiting his consent, she placed him safely on the stone, and hurried downward toward the place. She was sorry she had gone. It was the dead body of a seaman that had been found floating among the breakers just off the shore; and been brought in and placed in that spot, so dear, and yet so perilous to Constance. She shuddered, and went back, saying,

if it had only recently fallen away, for the skin hung unpleasantly down the sides of the cheeks, and at the edge of the chin. He took off his hat to answer the respectful salutations that from time to time greeted him in spite of the worn character of his dress, and other signs of extreme poverty, and then the whole head appeared covered with long silver threads, that glittered and waved about in the sunshine and the light breeze. He was very feeble, and evidently needed the woman's arm; who, for additional security, let her other arm cross her breast, so that the hand might clasp his hand, and she might know he could not, by withdrawing it, fall suddenly, and without timely warning to her.

The woman was young, and might have been beautiful under different circumstances. If so, she had changed sadly. The smile that had once suggested to a delighted gazer on her face something so sweet and ineffable that he could compare it to nothing but the gleam of primroses and daffodils, was now rigid, mournful, almost stern. Her dress was also very shabby; and — through the dust of the road along which they had travelled, or through the pre-occupation of her thoughts by more serious matters — almost seemed to be worn without even the ordinary sense of womanly neatness. Thus when her father had insisted on stopping half a mile off to wash his hands and face, and had given a cottager a penny out of

their last remaining pittance to lend them the where-withal to brush their clothes and boots, she had stood aloof, as if unconcerned, till he was ready, when she again gave him the bodily support he needed. And then it had been that she had said to him her last word of remonstrance:—

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“Death — death — everywhere! — within and without! Not even that spot sacred to him!” And that was all. And then the two travellers resumed their journey.

CHAPTER XIX.

COUNTING THE MILE-STONES.

“THERE, father, see; another mile-stone! Only three more now.”

The old man looked on her earnestly, and smiled. Strange to say that smile brought the first tear for many a long day into the woman's eyes. It was so sweet, so unusual from him. But when he said,

“Do let me sit down on the grass, I am so weary,” the two facts coming together, at once confounded and frightened her.

“Yes, yes; we will sit down;” and then, with all her old tenderness coming back, let loose by his smile as if it had been so much frozen ice, she let him down gently upon the green and sloping bank; and fetched him some water in a little horn vessel that she drew from her pocket, and made him drink it; and then she persuaded him to eat some fragments of soft biscuit, though he kept on saying he didn't want it, and she did. And then she began to try to lighten his spirits.

“You know, father, I didn't think we ought to go

back to Aberford, but then it wasn't that I doubted the kindness or respect of the people ——”

“No, no, I know that,” chimed in feebly the old man.

“And as we are nearly there now, we will make the best of it.”

“Yes, yes; that's right. Perhaps I may get into a nice shop again, and then my wonderful adventures, you know, will help us very much. I don't like to say it, but do you know that that dreadful fire turned out very useful to the business. It was much better after — O, very much!” And the poor old man began to rub his thin hands. But presently he sighed, and was a long time silent. And then again he smiled, as he happened to meet Constance's eyes; and she was sure it was a smile different from any she had ever known. What could it be? what could it mean? The heart of the “little poplar” began once more to beat to new emotions, but she sternly put a stop to them, by abruptly rising up, and saying,

“Come, father, let us go.”

“Yes, yes; but mind the right way — the lower road, not the upper one: past the plague-stone.”

Constance sighed over this extraordinary perversity that would insist on going to every one of the places that her instinct taught her he ought to shun; but she had long ceased to oppose him in little things,

while managing to compel obedience in matters of greater import.

But the old man found it hard work to go on. He constantly stopped; though generally he did so under some kind of excuse, and with some kind of apology, that inexpressibly touched the poor woman's heart. And then seeing how like a child he had become, she wooed him on as she remembered herself to have been once wooed on by her mother when she was a child on a day of long travel. Every object in advance she made the subject of a little doubt, or pleasant hypothesis, or statement of interesting facts as to their journey, so as to get him to want to reach it, and then to reach the next, and so on.

"See, father," she once said; "from that mile-stone you can see the bridge across the Shene; and from the bridge you can see the plague-stone; and from the top of the plague-stone, where you once put me to frighten me, you can easily see the tops of the Grammar School, in the High Street. Don't you wish we could take great leaps—one, two, three, and be in Aberford? Well, we can't do that; but when you are sitting in Aberford, as you will be soon, drinking a nice cup of tea, you'll have done just as well by walking like this as if you had had the boots you once told me of in the fairy tale."

The old man laughed; and as in so doing he seemed

better able to collect his thoughts and understand what he had laughed at, he laughed again.

“You see, father, we’ve only to think of it in one way, and to do it in another, to get over the ground capitally.”

“Think one way—do another? Yes—yes—yes—that’s it; that’s it. But we must brush up a bit, musn’t we, soon?” And he began to look dubiously at his dusty black clothes and patched boots.

“O yes, when we get nearer. Why, father, you go so fast, that you don’t heed the mile-stones now. There’s the second behind you.”

“So there is; wonderful!”

But in spite of Constance’s ceaseless struggle with his weariness, and her no less ceaseless struggle with herself, to come out of herself and think only of him, act only for him, the way seemed to lengthen fearfully; and all the vivacity was passing once more away from her eye and heart, when they came suddenly upon the plague-stone. She had forgotten it. Not so, Mr. Chorley.

“There it is!” And the old man, moved by some impulse unknown to himself, took off his hat, where he stood, yet at a little distance; and his long thin silvery hair went streaming away in the wind, while he gazed with deep emotion and new strength mantling in his cheek, and illumining his eyes.

They went, slowly, just a little nearer; then stopped

at his admonitory touch. Then again nearer, and he murmured,

“Constance, do you know, did you ever ask, why this plague-stone was erected?”

It was a strange question, Constance thought, to come from him. Surely he must know its history better than herself.

“Yes, father,” she replied. “Your little book said that when the plague in coming from the south passed through this neighbourhood ever so long ago, the house where it stayed was pulled down, and the stone put up by the monks in grateful recollection.”

“Yes, yes; my book was quite right. Strange, wasn’t it—the plague to stop just there.”

“Why strange, father? It must have stopped somewhere.”

But the old man’s lips moved inarticulately in answer; some thought—or rather some feeling—moved him deeply. Constance was alarmed at this sudden speechlessness, and said,

“You don’t feel worse, father?” Coming close to him and listening for his words she gathered that he was troubling himself about the fact that the plague had stopped at the spot where his children once departed from him for ever; and she saw him look at her, and try to smile as he before smiled, but break down, in grief that was too feeble for many tears.

“Do you feel worse, father?” Constance repeated.

“No, no. Besides, I don’t mind now. Perhaps we mayn’t have to walk any more.”

“What does he mean?” Constance vainly asked herself. But suddenly he set her thoughts going at a fearful rate by his next words.

“You think he’ll come, don’t you?”

“Who, father?”

“Why, Christopher Vallon, to be sure.”

“Christopher Vallon, father?” The old man put his finger to his temple with a vacant look as he murmured in a low tone, believing perhaps he was only thinking.

“Didn’t I tell her? No, I was afraid. I must now. Yes, I must.” Then, seeking Constance’s face, he said, “O! don’t you know—I wrote to Kit days and days ago, to tell him how poor we were; and how we were coming back to Aberford; and how he musn’t think you guilty of the fire, for it was me. Yes,” he said, excitedly, “I told him, and I never told anybody before; I told him for your sake, Constance. No—no—I don’t mean that—I—.” But there he stopped.

And then, before Constance could shape out any words in answer, she saw a great change come over her father’s face, while his frame trembled visibly—and he said in accents of such anguish as she had never before heard from him—

“O God, I am dying. Hold me, let me down!”

She laid him on the grass, and knelt by his side,

gazing yearningly into his face for some sign of recovery. And after a kind of convulsion her prayer seemed answered. Again he smiled, though very sadly; again he spoke, and now with renewed clearness of intellect.

“Constance, I—I’m afraid things haven’t been altogether with me as they should have been.”

“Look up, father! If you think so, ask God’s forgiveness even now.”

“Yes, yes, I will pray: I am praying. You too! O, Constance! if God will not listen to your prayers, what will become of me? But I always meant to change when things had got comfortable. I only waited for that. Why don’t you pray?”

“Father, my whole soul is pleading for you with God.”

“No, no, you cannot care for me.”

“Father, it is as I have said.”

“No, I have wronged you too much.”

“Father, if you could but know how I forgive you—how in this black hour I love you.”

“Ah, but it is because you do not know all.”

“Father, no knowledge could change me.”

“Constance,” said the miserable man, trying to turn his head away from her before he spoke again, but as she would not let him, but followed his eye with her own fervent, yearning gaze, he dropped his eyelids while the unwilling words came forth in frightful clearness,

“It was I who—to rid myself of a moment’s fear—a moment’s danger connected with your strange journey—gave the agent the idea that you had intended, in a fit of passion, to burn down the house.”

“It was cruel, father; it was wicked. But I forgive you, and ask you not to fear my love, but to vouchsafe to me in this last hour one word that may say you do truly love me.”

“O Constance! Constance! life has left me only that—has brought me through all to that—and my greatest trouble now is, you can have no right to believe me.”

Constance said nothing in answer, but lifted him up a little and drew him to her, with his head leaning on her breast, which was heaving with all the old childish, passionate yearnings; and he was no longer frightened of them or of her, but smiled on her even through all the despair that was fast growing upon him. But he seemed as though he would not give way to it. He seemed as though he could wrestle not with God’s angel only as Jacob did, but with God himself, as he held Constance, and seemed to make her, and her goodness and devotion, his bulwark against the Divine summons to judgment.

But his strength was failing fast. He leaned against her so heavily that she was forced back till she touched the plague-stone—the very plague-stone by which he had watched his children going forth alone into

life that spring morning. The black clouds parted; the moonlight fell upon their faces; the wind rushed fiercely by, mingling the black and silver hair together; and still the two figures by the plague-stone were motionless. She was gazing down upon his face, not in fear—no, not in fear now, or hope—but in cold, despairing misery. To know she had his love at last, only to lose it there! This was death: she knew it—knew that in another minute she would be standing on the road, the only traveller left of all the *three*. She gathered him close in her arms, with a low, bitter, pleading cry, that said, plainer than any words, “Me too, God! me too! I, too, am weary! O, let my journey end!” Once more the form in her arms writhed and shivered, and she saw the glassy, glittering eyes turn, gazing eastwards. Mechanically she let her own eyes follow them, and beheld, only a stone’s throw off, figures moving across the black, wind-swept heath.

“Going—going away—leaving me here to die with my crime,” said her father, gazing half-blinded on the two forms.

But Constance suddenly pressed him against her heart, closely, wildly, as if to stifle the cry which nature, long suppressed, sent forth to the foremost figure on the heath, that seemed not a human figure only to her, but, like the break of morning over the desolate, death-haunted road, a sudden star rising beyond

all her black misery. It might have been taken for a group of sculptured stone on the dark roadside, so still and silent were they now, with both faces set towards the east, whence one saw Death approaching, and the other Life.

Presently her father said, in a kind of self-communing under-tone,

“They are coming back, thank God, they are coming back! She is but a child, and her heart fails her at the thought of such a journey. But what is that to my journey? You know I ought soon to reach Heaven! Tell me—softly—do you think I shall get there? I mean now that it is certain she goes with me wherever I go. O, she won’t leave me! I know her well. The bravest soul, and yet the timidiest! Well, well, well! God will take care of her anyhow.”

When Kit,—outstripping his less vigorous but scarcely less agitated father; knowing now, from Mr. Chorley’s confession, the truth,—came close up to them, seeking with new love and reverence the long-married wife of his soul, one of the two forms on the grass was as senseless as the plague-stone by which they knelt; while the other, with her arms wrapped about the dead, still turned her face towards him, as one down in a deep pit of darkness and agony might yet lift her face, transfigured at once by love and sorrow, towards the sky.

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Presently her father said, in a kind of self-communing under-tone,

“They are coming back, thank God, they are coming back! She is but a child, and her heart fails her at the thought of such a journey. But what is that to my journey? You know I ought soon to reach Heaven! Tell me—softly—do you think I shall get there? I mean now that it is certain she goes with me wherever I go. O, she won’t leave me! I know her well. The bravest soul, and yet the timidest! Well, well, well! God will take care of her anyhow.”

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life that spring morning. The black clouds parted; the moonlight fell upon their faces; the wind rushed fiercely by, mingling the black and silver hair together; and still the two figures by the plague-stone were motionless. She was gazing down upon his face, not in fear—no, not in fear now, or hope—but in cold, despairing misery. To know she had his love at last, only to lose it there! This was death: she knew it—knew that in another minute she would be standing on the road, the only traveller left of all the *three*. She gathered him close in her arms, with a low, bitter, pleading cry, that said, plainer than any words, “Me too, God! me too! I, too, am weary! O, let my journey end!” Once more the form in her arms writhed and shivered, and she saw the glassy, glittering eyes turn, gazing eastwards. Mechanically she let her own eyes follow them, and beheld, only a stone’s throw off, figures moving across the black, wind-swept heath.

“Going—going away—leaving me here to die with my crime,” said her father, gazing half-blinded on the two forms.

But Constance suddenly pressed him against her heart, closely, wildly, as if to stifle the cry which nature, long suppressed, sent forth to the foremost figure on the heath, that seemed not a human figure only to her, but, like the break of morning over the desolate, death-haunted road, a sudden star rising beyond

all her black misery. It might have been taken for a group of sculptured stone on the dark roadside, so still and silent were they now, with both faces set towards the east, whence one saw Death approaching, and the other Life.

Presently her father said, in a kind of self-communing under-tone,

“They are coming back, thank God, they are coming back! She is but a child, and her heart fails her at the thought of such a journey. But what is that to my journey? You know I ought soon to reach Heaven! Tell me—softly—do you think I shall get there? I mean now that it is certain she goes with me wherever I go. O, she won’t leave me! I know her well. The bravest soul, and yet the timidest! Well, well, well! God will take care of her anyhow.”

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Saunders, John

The Plague-stone of Aberford

Leipzig 1864

P.o.angl. 19 I-64/66

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